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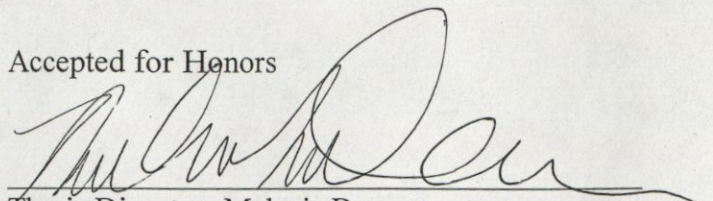
Stripping the Paint: Uncovering the Self-Made Man in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Great Gatsby*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

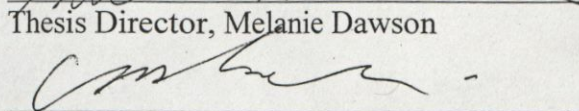
by

Emma Elena Johnson

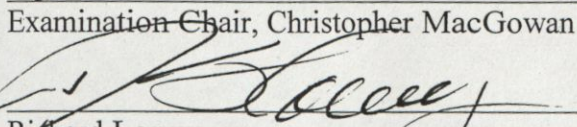
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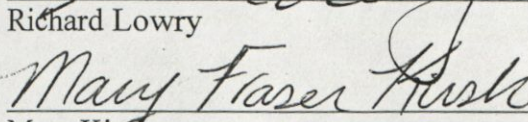
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May 1, 2018

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Introduction

The Rise of Silas Lapham by W. D. Howells and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald are two novels in which the potential and limitations of the self-made man are explored. Both Lapham and Gatsby are impressively successful self-made men who, through business cunning and sheer grit, amass enormous fortunes despite their insignificant origins. In spite of their achievement, ambition, and resilience, Lapham and Gatsby, in their own contexts, awaken to knowledge of a social hierarchy that was unknown to the characters until personally encountered. This invisible and insurmountable class dynamic contradicts the American ethic of democratic social mobility and awakens the self-made men to recognition of the limitations of their money. In each text, the titular characters are forced to confront a confounding social problem and reassess their definitions of success and masculinity in light of a new awareness of social insufficiency.

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Lapham first becomes aware of the limitations of his money when he attempts to integrate himself and his family into Bostonian society. Lapham, born to a poor and honest Vermont family, made his fortune from the mineral paint mines on his property. Although he had been rich and living in Boston with his wife and children for a number of years, the Laphams remained uncultured and largely isolated from high society. Silas Lapham becomes aware of a personal deficit when he emotionally invests in the idea of acquiring Tom Corey, the descendant of a well-established and truly cultivated Boston Brahmin family, as a business partner and son-in-law. An association with the well-known Coreys would provide Lapham with a social advantage that Lapham cannot purchase. Lapham, before independent and autonomous to attain whatever he desired, becomes dependent on the approval of Tom for this new social goal. As a man who has worked diligently and aggressively for all else that he has wanted in life,

Lapham knows no better than to approach his social ambitions with the same stalwart tenacity as he would his business endeavors. Lapham's wife Persis, though born from the same kind of rough, indistinct stock as her husband, is more aware of the nebulous class codes that rule Bostonian society. In the following passage, Persis attempts to answer Lapham's bewilderment as to why he should wait for the Coreys to "make an advance" in connecting their families rather than making that advance himself:

"... are they any better than we are? My note of hand would be worth ten times what Bromfield Corey's is on the street to-day. And I made *my* money. I haven't loafed my life away."

"Oh, it isn't what you've got, and it isn't what you've done exactly. It's what you are."

"Well, then, what's the difference?"

"None that really amounts to anything, or that need give you any trouble, if you don't think of it. But he's been all his life in society, and he knows just wants to say and what to do, and he can talk about the things that society people like to talk about, and you—can't."

Lapham gave a furious snort. "And does that make him any better?"

"No. But it puts him where he can make the advances without demeaning himself, and it puts you where you can't... I'm not going to have you coming to me, and pretending that you can meet Bromfield Corey as an equal on his own ground. You can't. He's got a better education than you, and if he hasn't got more brains than you, he's got different. And he and his wife, and their fathers and grandfathers before 'em, have always

had a high position, and you can't help it. If you want to know them, you've got to let them make the advances." (Howells 120)

Lapham understands social position through the lens of wealth, and therefore cannot fathom why it would be *he* who would be "demeaning himself" by making a social advance when his "note of hand would be worth ten times what Bromfield Corey's is on the street to-day" and better yet, he "made [*his*] money" himself (Howells 120). And it's no wonder: Persis's explanations are not precise, and the quality she is attempting to explicate is intangible and impossible to perfectly define. In an effort to explain this social code, Mrs. Lapham must extricate the nuances of what makes somebody *somebody*, and the best she can offer is: "it isn't what you've got, and it isn't what you've done exactly. It's what you are" (Howells 120).

These terms, though vague, are effective in communicating the non-intuitive nature of class boundaries at play. Lapham has mistakenly assumed that "what you are" is a mere sum of "what you've got" and "what you've done," or that, in a perfectly egalitarian society, it ought to be (Howells 120). However, although this quality might be characterized by wealth, it's not wealth. Although it might be characterized by what you've got, it's not what you've got. Although it might be characterized by "good sense and right ideas," it's not that alone (Howells 138). The characters struggle to define what *it* is, but *it* can no more be defined than it can be named. Bromfield Corey, resting easy in his sure possession of *it*, finds great repose in its intangibility as he explains these qualities to his son as those "which may be felt, but not defined" (Howells 138). Part of what engenders this quality in the Coreys, according to Persis, is their saturation in society; Bromfield Corey has "been all his life in society, and he knows just what to say and what to do, and he can talk about the things that society people like to talk about" (Howells 120). Not only has he spent all of his life in the right circles, but "his wife, and their fathers and

grandfathers before 'em, have always had a high position" (Howells 120). The longevity and the seeming originlessness of the Coreys's rank is what distinguishes them; it's their *history* of wealth more than the wealth itself, and the prestige of their "education" even more than the quality of their "brains" (Howells 120).

This passage is significant because it addresses the ambiguous mysteries of class politics at play between the self-made families and the Boston Brahmin families. Though in America there is no official nobility, there is an unwritten aristocracy that rules over culture and society. For Silas Lapham, he is forced to confront this underlying social hierarchy and accept that his hard-earned "money has its limitations," that "what [he's] got" and "what [he's] done" is not enough to make up for *who he is* at his plebeian core (Howells 99, 120). This limitation creates in him a desperation that makes him susceptible to financial, moral, and social ruin.

Both *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Great Gatsby* contain conversations that delve into the nuances of class, manhood, and success from the perspectives of both the social aspirants and the social elites. These moments in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are particularly straightforward in their discussion of underlying class dynamics and provide helpful language for setting up similar but less candid conversations in *The Great Gatsby*. One such moment occurs in chapter six of *The Great Gatsby*; Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway experience the awkward friction of new-money ignorance fraternizing with old-money know-how. Initially, this scene seems of little consequence and is easily lost among similar scenes laden with painful party-fouls, tea-times, dinner-talk, and day-trips, but it beautifully illustrates both the social dependency and ignorance of the eponymous. Nick finds himself over at Gatsby's house and he "hadn't been there two minutes when somebody brought Tom Buchanan in for a drink," as well as a fellow named Sloane and an anonymous woman (Fitzgerald 101). The meeting is brief and awkward; the text

claims that Gatsby “would [have] been uneasy . . . until he had given them something, realizing in a vague way that that was all they came for,” and yet, the party of three refuses to accept anything from their host (Fitzgerald 101). Gatsby offers them drinks, small talk, and even recognition— “I believe we’ve met somewhere before, Mr. Buchanan,” says Gatsby, to which Tom is “obviously not remembering”— all in attempt to gain approval from his guests that serve as gatekeepers to his social mobility (Fitzgerald 101-102). In each instance, the gesture is refused by the three guests and the social gap between them and Gatsby increases. This indifference endows the guests with increased power and leaves Gatsby more vulnerable for his efforts. There is some invisible social limitation that keeps Gatsby being able to provide “all they came for” (Fitzgerald 101).

The scene reaches an apex of awkwardness over the issue of a dinner invitation. Gatsby, to his folly, prematurely and “almost aggressively” insists the three visitors “stay for supper” (Fitzgerald 102). Whereas Lapham had his wife to educate him on the degradation induced by inappropriate social advances, Gatsby has no such awareness. The woman politely evades his invitation with her own invitation for Gatsby and Nick to instead have dinner with her. Gatsby, in his naiveté, takes the invitation literally, oblivious to the hidden layer of communication at play in her statement. When Gatsby briefly leaves their company to gather his things for dinner, Tom confides to Nick:

“My God, I believe the man’s coming,” said Tom. “Doesn’t he know she doesn’t want him?”

“She says she does want him.”

“She had a big dinner party and he won’t know a soul there.” He frowned.

(Fitzgerald 103)

Although the woman insists verbally that Gatsby should join them for supper, through some sort of invisible language, her comrade “Mr. Sloane had determined [Gatsby] shouldn’t” accept the invitation (Fitzgerald 103). Tom and Sloane expect Gatsby to read between the lines of her language and know that beneath her words that not only is he unwanted, but that he had no right or reason to join them. In their own code, Tom and Sloane know this kind of invitation is not sincere, but merely a perfunctory gesture, meant to be politely declined. When Tom says that Gatsby “[wouldn’t] know a soul there,” he is saying that Gatsby does not *belong* in their social sphere and, at their dinner table, would be out of place and out of his depth (Fitzgerald 103). Gatsby’s pathetic vulnerability and ignorance is revealed when he, “with hat and light overcoat in hand, came out the front door” to realize his dinner hosts had left without him (Fitzgerald 103). Gatsby is left doubly vulnerable for both not being the right sort of person to attend their dinner party but also for not knowing it.

Over the course of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, both Gatsby and Lapham, as self-made men, must face their lack of cultural capital and the limitations of their financial capital. Social achievement is not something that can be acquired within the self but must be bestowed by an outside agent who is an insider to the social sphere in which the self-made man desires to belong. This paradox strips the self-made man of his self-made identity, for in order to achieve his social goals, he cannot depend on the self-reliance that makes him self-made but must depend on the acceptance and approval of others. The above moments reveal the self-made man’s dependency on others for their social success, and how subtly such dependency can develop. His identity goes beyond himself as an individual and extends in name, reputation,

and wealth to his family and the generations to follow. When he begins to care about his own place in the social hierarchy— as well as his family’s place— he then becomes vulnerable.

Gatsby and Lapham engage with this paradox in different ways. Lapham finds pride in his self-madeness and the humble origins from which he made his rise. He also expresses contempt as he watches his family participate in degrading social gymnastics and take on social anxieties for the sake of acceptance by the Boston Brahmin. In a moment when both Persis and Lapham are in crisis about preparations for the Corey’s elite dinner party, Persis snaps at her husband in a moment of frustrated self-awareness, saying, “. . . you’ve been perfectly crazy to get in with [the Coreys]. And now you’re so afraid you shall do something wrong before ‘em, you don’t hardly dare to say your life’s your own” (Howells 185). Indeed, in striving for social integration, the Laphams’s lives are no longer their own, but surrendered to the Coreys for their approval. Lapham is redeemed from this groveling, degrading dynamic by complete social and financial ruin. Regrettable behavior at the Corey’s dinner party and reckless investment choices strip the Laphams of their material and social prosperity, yet this social fall allows the Laphams to regroup and become restored to the dignity of the self-reliance they embodied before their social aspirations got the best of them. The novel concludes with a return to the rustic Vermont estate where the Laphams live humble yet respectably self-sufficient lives. In Christianized terms, they lose the world but restore their souls.

Like Silas Lapham, Jay Gatsby is a self-made man, but where the two men differ is in their relationship to their identities as self-made men. When Lapham begins to perceive his lack of cultural capital even amidst the abundance of his monetary capital, it does not take him long to learn and accept his inherent inability to attain the essence of Old-Money culture. Lapham’s pride in his self-made identity and ability to accept the limitations of that identity redeems his

dignity, even if it costs him material and social success. Gatsby, however, has only ever operated out of his social deficit. His actions have been shaped by his desire to close the gap between himself and the status of the American cultural aristocracy. Although the nagging knowledge of his social insufficiency serves Gatsby by fueling his ambition and his economic success, his “extraordinary gift for hope” deludes him into thinking he can fake his way to cultural fluency (Fitzgerald 2). He shrouds his self-made history with a rewritten past that alters his family origin, education, and career to present himself as an old-money heir, disowning the self-made elements of his identity completely and refusing to accept the accompanying limitations of that self-madeness. Gatsby unblinkingly assumes a degrading dependency on the Buchanans, particularly his former lover Daisy, for the approval and authentication of his social imitations. But everything about Gatsby is fake— his home, his past, and even his name— and eventually reveals his social deficits at a devastating cost. While Lapham, in humble acceptance of his social limitations, is offered a moral redemption at the close of his story, Gatsby, in his failure to accept the distinction between cultural and financial capital, eventually encounters tragic downfall.

It is this difference between owning one’s heritage and erasing one’s heritage that strikes at an interesting generational dynamic in these texts that determines either tragedy or redemption for the self-made man. When all external determiners of success crumble in Lapham’s life, he roots into his family unit and returns to his family estate that has housed an entire lineage of Laphams whom, though financially poor, have embodied a rich moral lineage. Just as he is caught in the safety net of his generational past, Lapham’s greatness, though diminished for him individually, flourishes onward through his daughter Pen who, now married to Tom Corey, has a promising life before her. Gatsby, on the other hand, having cut all ties from his humble origins

and failed to create a family of his own, has no generational legacy to fall back on and no generational legacy to pass on. With no support structure or future outlet to alleviate the fallout of his self-made limitations, Gatsby experiences an undoing that is the complete destruction of both his person and his name.

The Generational Responsibilities of the Self-Made Man in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by W. D. Howells, Silas Lapham faces a crossroads in his career as a self-made man. Born in backwoods Vermont into an impoverished yet moral family, Lapham made his wealth by commodifying a mineral paint mine that his father had discovered on their family property. Although the label of “self-made” suggests that Lapham’s attainment of wealth was a largely individualistic affair, Lapham’s interview at the beginning of the novel reveals that on his own he would never have had the ambition to seek opportunity in the dormant paint mine, much less discovered it himself. He “‘*wa’n’t* exactly a college graduate, and...went to school at odd times’” until he “‘got to driving the stage after a while, and by and by...bought the stage and ran the business [himself]’” (Howells 9). Content at his small management success as a coachman, he “put off” looking at the possibilities with the mine until he could no longer resist his wife’s insistence that they “paint up” and try out the mineral paint on the property (Howells 9). It is Persis’s domestic vision that prompts Silas into his self-made success and that provides him with the opportunistic vision to see that the paint has financial potential beyond the home. As Persis says of their lucky finding, they “‘haint got a paint-mine...[they] got a *gold-mine*’” (Howells 10).¹ Lapham names their finest brand after his wife and knows with a deep pride and affection that “‘if it hadn’t been for her...the paint wouldn’t have come to anything’” (Howells 14). That Persis was so instrumental in Lapham’s success from the beginning of his business career demonstrates the essentiality of family in the seemingly individualistic affairs of the self-made man.

Persis and Silas have two daughters, Penelope (called Pen) and Irene. Irene is described as unusually beautiful, with an “innocence almost vegetable,” suggesting a somewhat bland simplicity complicit in her seeming “innocence” (Howells 27). She is fashionable and good-

hearted, and cares more for the anti-modern tasks of housekeeping than intellectual pursuits or studying. Pen on the other hand, though plain in appearance, is opinionated and speaks with a fierce wit that deviates from simple earnestness found in her family members. She cares little for society yet has “an odd taste for her own reading” and a certain aptitude for literary matters that allow her to connect to the cultural tastes of higher class spheres (Howells 26). Silas and Persis fail to notice the cultural value of Penelope’s literary tastes, or the value of literary tastes in general; Irene and Penelope had “gone to the public schools” but their education had stalled after “graduating from the grammar-school, where Lapham thought that they had got education enough” (Howells 26). Instead, the Laphams are more ambitious for the aesthetic Irene, as they see the most social potential in Irene because of her great beauty. The Laphams mistakenly interpret culture to be about beauty alone. This limited understanding of what constitutes culture guides and undermines their social pursuits throughout the novel.

However, the Laphams had not always viewed their daughters in terms of social and cultural value at all. Persis excels as the stalwart wife of a struggling entrepreneur but finds herself at a loss when it comes to the duties of a leisure-class housewife— a role she quickly finds herself assuming. At the beginning of the novel, Lapham has already made his fortune, and has made it rapidly. Silas Lapham and his wife were born ““country people,”” and their wealth ““came with such rush”” that, despite all the change, they had ““kept [their] country ways”” and hadn’t ““had any chance to learn what to do with”” their newfound riches (Howells 30). The Laphams amass great, impressive wealth in a short amount of time, yet their mannerisms, values, and perspectives remain residual of the life they had come from. Although they have the money to buy their way into the most exclusive clubs or the ritziest neighborhoods, the Laphams do not have the cultural tastes required to truly fit into or to appreciate the cultural depth of their new

milieu. Rather than valuing Lapham's anti-modern values of temperance, prudence, and hard work, the new class that the Laphams have worked their way into values education, literacy, fine talk, fine art, and tastes of perfect simplicity. These matters are foreign to the family, and therefore ignored.

The Laphams are poor people living rich lives and are unequipped to engage in the rituals and labor of the leisure society they had happened upon. Despite "all [their] prosperity, they had not had a social life" and "they did not know how to spend on society" (Howells 25). In these quotes, a "social life" and "society" are presented in economic terms in the same way as is their material "prosperity" (Howells 25). This shows that a "social life" is an object that one either possesses or lacks, and that "society" is the marketplace in which a certain kind of social or cultural capital is exchanged. In order to be successful in the marketplace of society, one must participate in the cultural labor of education, refinement, and social connection, not just the capitalist labors that allowed one to ascend to the higher-class level.

The Laphams, in their country simplicity, are ignorant of the economy of cultural labor that occurs in the folds of Bostonian society and draw closer in on the simple comforts of the home. Having "no skill or courage to make themselves noticed," the family learned to rely on "the very strength of their mutual affection" (Howells 27). This image of an intimate, self-sufficient family unit is endearing, but ultimately unsustainable. Their class innocence is not entirely innocent, but rather, like Irene, the family's "innocence [is] almost vegetable" (Howells 27). Though their social ignorance preserves their inner sense of dignity, it also limits and hinders them from becoming civilized according to the standards of high-society. Their familial intimacy serves as a "barrier to worldly knowledge; they dressed for one another; they equipped their house for their own satisfaction; they lived richly to themselves, not because they were selfish, but because they

did not know how to do otherwise” (Howells 27). As Mary Marchand observes in “Faking it: Social Bluffing and Class Difference in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” although this “state of class innocence...ensures one’s dignity and self-worth, [it] also acts as a ‘barrier’ to becoming civilized or, worse, allows one crudely to imagine that anything of value can be bought” (Marchand 288). Marchand reveals that the Laphams’s isolation places their very civilization at stake and purports false assumptions that cultural labor is unnecessary in the face of infinite purchasing power.

Moreover, the Laphams, as it turns out, cannot afford to *not* invest in building up their social lives for the sake of family name. Their daughters are of marriageable age and their family unit is reaching its natural expiration date. However, while Silas has been fulfilling his duty of capitalist labor, the cultural labor requisite for finding Penelope and Irene suitable suitors had been neglected by the Lapham women. In her role as the anti-modern wife, Persis had not always been neglectful of labor, but it was a labor limited to supporting economic success rather than cultural success. For instance, when the Laphams were just starting out in business, “their first years there were given to careful getting on Lapham’s part, and careful saving on his wife’s” (Howells 25). As soon as Lapham’s business began to pick up and “the money began to come so abundantly,” Persis’s partnered labor of saving became unnecessary (Howells 25). While Mr. Lapham continued to work persistently, with “not an hour of waste time about [him],” Persis is unwittingly thrust into the unknown role of playing the rich housewife (Howells 4). Together with her daughters, Persis lived an idle and aimless life of “abundant leisure” in which all “three [ladies] took long naps every day, and sat hours together minutely discussing what they saw out of the window” (Howells 26).

Their time is undirected by intentional productive activity, as they are unaware of the labor required in order to complete their patriarch's economic success. Part of Lapham's duties as a self-made patriarch is to pass his wealth down to following generations—a task that cannot be accomplished without the manners and mores that facilitate social connections. In this way, Silas's self-made wealth is not just a financial matter, but also a sociocultural one; it is not just individual, but also familial. The problem of staying culturally innocent—or rather ignorant—is that it threatens to undo all of Lapham's accumulated success. The sociocultural labor is burdened primarily on Mrs. Lapham and the girls and serves to *secure* the success that Silas Lapham has attained to last into subsequent generations. His work of making a name for himself and for his family dies with him unless the family conducts the social work necessary to be passed down from generation to generation.

This conflict comes into sharp relief with the juxtaposition of the nouveau-rich Laphams with the Coreys, a long-distinguished family of the Bostonian elite. The Coreys embody cultural labor in the way that the Laphams embody economic labor. The family patriarch, Bromfield Corey, is an emblem of second-generation, inherited wealth. Although his father, the late Phillips Corey, was a self-made man with a distinguished business tradition, Bromfield “had spent his youth abroad and his father's money everywhere and done nothing but say smart things” and would have “made himself a name as a painter of portraits if he had not had so much money” (Howells 92, 70). In his lifetime, Bromfield Corey had invested great time and energy into becoming civilized by different cultures whilst “abroad,” spending “his father's money” on things of respectable taste, participating in the art of talk and wit, and delving into hobby painting² like an American aristocrat (Howells 92).

These great cultural labors are engaged at the expense of financial labor; the self-made qualities of Bromfield's father, as represented in "the Roman nose," Bromfield "had not inherited," and instead, as a "slim, white-moustached man, with the slight stoop, [he] was everything that was offensively aristocratic" (Howells 69, 92). Bromfield Corey takes the intellectual and cultural labors to the extreme, at the expense of any financial enterprise or moral work ethic. As the Laphams are attempting to amass the cultural capital that the Coreys so effortlessly hold, it is possible to read the lifestyle maintained by the Coreys as an ideal to which the simple Laphams ought to aspire, as Zennure Köseman argues in "William Dean Howells' Work Ethic in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*." To Köseman, the Coreys largely function as gatekeepers of Bostonian society, upon whose approval the Laphams become dependent for social success. As representative members of "Boston's upper middle-class society, the Coreys, are the group of people on whom [Lapham] depends to acquire success," which means that they are the ones with the authority to define that success (Köseman 177). Although this dynamic exists between the Coreys and the Laphams, it would be too simplistic to say that the Coreys are not an ideal representation of American humanity. Rather, the Coreys and the Laphams are opposite sides of the same coin. Both the Laphams and the Coreys have developed their ideologies so remotely from each other that they require marriage to bring them together, to create a balance between civilized acculturation and the homegrown virtues of the self-made man.

The main problems— and solution— of the plot occur in the conflict and resolutions of the two families coming together. It is Persis who first meets the Coreys, these "other" Bostonians. Persis's encounter with the Coreys forces her to recognize the social and cultural marketplace of Boston of which their family had been ignorant, and of the cultural labor she and her family had

been failing to participate in. She recognizes her country ignorance and awakens into the painful knowledge that she indeed is lacking “something” that she never felt the absence of before; she learns that ““there’s got to be something besides money”” (Howells 30). Marchand reads this moment as a “shift from being-for-themselves to being-for-others,” and claims that it “is initiation when the Laphams become suddenly and acutely aware of what readers already know: a gulf separates them from the Coreys” (Marchand 288). Although “Persis describes the Coreys to Silas as ‘the nicest people’ with ‘the best manners,’ she recognizes that the encounter ‘made [her] feel as if [she] had always lived in the backwoods’” (Marchand 288, Howells 28). Marchand’s insights are valuable because they expose that Persis realizes not only that her family is different from the Coreys, but that that difference makes them inferior. This awakening, on top of being shameful, is shocking. She and her family must make up for this social deficit in themselves and, with her daughters ripe for marriage, they have no more time to waste in becoming civilized.

This “something besides money” is what Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* would identify as “cultural capital.” According to Bourdieu, “there is an economy of cultural goods,” with its own “specific logic” (Howells 30, Bourdieu 1). This economy consists of “cultural practices” and “preferences in literature, painting or music” that create a “socially recognized hierarchy of the arts” and that “corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers” (Bourdieu 1). In other words, it is valuable to have high-culture tastes and to express them in the way a family spends their time and their money, as this hierarchy “predisposes *tastes* to function as markers of class” (Bourdieu 1-2, emphasis mine).

These “practices” and “preferences” for cultural taste are “closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin”

(Bourdieu 1). Although these factors imply wealth, wealth itself is not what dignifies cultural competency. The Laphams, though of enormous wealth, are self-made. They lack formal schooling, a distinguished pedigree, and therefore the “cultural competence, that is, the code, into which [the meaning and interest of higher culture] is encoded” (Bourdieu 2). Although the Laphams in their egregious wealth “‘could buy...and sell [the Coreys], twice over,’” they are completely impoverished when it comes to the “hierarchy of the arts” (Howells 28, Bourdieu 1).

Other critics read Bourdieu similarly, particularly Mary Marchand who leans heavily upon *Distinction* in her article. Marchand uses Bourdieu’s ideas to assert that “while the canons of taste may change, one’s relationship to culture serves as a permanent marker of class difference” (Marchand 297). In her analysis, this Bourdieusian insight is a way that a character like Tom, though himself not terribly intellectual, can lay claim to culture like an heirloom through his upbringing. Although he may not personally be more literary than Lapham, his childhood and family name secure literary distinction for him. Marchand—and in a way, Köseman—apply Bourdieu to understand the shift that occurs when the Laphams move from class ignorance to social awareness. Marchand uses Bourdieu’s terms to identify this recognition as “no less than a shift from being-for-themselves to being-for-others” (Marchand 288).

Though she does not employ Bourdieu’s exact language, Köseman argues a shift from being-for-themselves to being-for-others in the regards to how Lapham defines success for himself on an individual level as a self-made man. Köseman states that after the Civil War, the accepted definition of success evolved from “moral perfection” to “the acquisition of...material wealth” (Köseman 175). She complicates this definition by noting that moral improvement is achieved through “self-reliance” whereas material and social success is attained through “dependence on others” (Köseman 176). Lapham’s shift from being self-reliant to being

dependent upon the Coreys and the legacy of his daughters for social approval mirrors Bourdieu's language about the psychology of the Laphams as they seek cultural approval yet adds a commentary on the morality of such a shift in thinking and operating.

This recognition of a distinction between material and social capital sets up a central concern in the novel that goes beyond matters of social belonging—it presents a desire for generational longevity and the present insufficiency of the Lapham's name to endure into the next generation. This generational problem regarding the continuation of the family line is resolved in the institution of marriage. Mrs. Lapham's interaction with the Corey women makes her realize that her family's social isolation is not inconsequential, but a potential detriment, especially when it comes to matching their daughters with prospective husbands. With this in mind, it is not the Corey women in particular that Mrs. Lapham is taken by, but the son, Tom Corey. Mrs. Lapham “compared him with other young men about the place, and thought him nicer than any of them,” with just ““about perfect ways”” (Howells 25, 28). It's not necessarily for Tom himself that Mrs. Lapham becomes ambitious, but for what he represents: a man with social advantages that will serve the social success of her daughters. Persis envisions that her daughters might be happiest married to a man like Tom: someone charming, polite, and well-bred that could provide for them not only financially, but also socially.

However, with this newly realized desire comes a newly realized deficit. For the past however many years, she and her daughters have been loafing about, isolated from greater society, and, consequentially, have been missing out on meeting the right people and preparing the girls for marriage. After realizing how she and their daughters have been neglecting their requisite cultural labor, Persis attempts to explain the social crisis to her husband:

“I presume we didn't go to work just the right way about their schooling. We ought to have got them into some school where they'd have got acquainted with city girls— girls who could help them along . . .”

“Well, it's pretty late to think about that now,” grumbled Lapham.

“And we've always gone our own way, and not looked out for the future. We ought to have gone out more, and had people come to the house. Nobody comes.” (Howells 30)

Persis uses the language of labor to express the ways that she and their daughters have failed to engage in their class station, particularly when it comes to the importance of education as a means of social mobility. She and Lapham “‘didn't *go to work* just the right way about their [children's] schooling,’” as they should have gotten to know “‘girls who could help them along’” (Howells 30, emphasis mine). Persis correctly identifies the importance of schooling as a *space* where connections can be forged with the right company that could facilitate upward mobility through the politics of connection as well as through the assimilation of manners and taste. Although Persis is aware of the social acculturation potential of the right schooling, she mentions nothing about the power of education itself as a cultural labor.

This reveals the holes in Mrs. Lapham's understanding of cultural labor— although prestigious school name and the right friends are important factors in social mobility, they are merely aesthetic and not complete on their own. The internalization of intellectual material, history, culture, and wit are equally, if not more, vital for belonging in high-culture circles. The second area of deficit that Persis realizes in how their family as a unit has failed to “go to work” is in making themselves socially known (Howells 30). Instead of just going “their own way,” Mrs. Lapham laments that in order to have “‘looked out for their future’” by “‘[going] out more’” and inviting people to “‘come to [their] house’” (Howells 30). Without having

established relationships from such social interactions, the Laphams are left with little social currency to integrate themselves and their daughters into society.

In assuming her cultural duties, Mrs. Lapham's first task is to remedy the problem of location. While before the Laphams were content to live in unfashionable Nankeen Square for its practicality, Mrs. Lapham becomes embarrassed when she realizes how much her family's geographical isolation bolsters their social isolation. The Laphams were blissful in their ignorance, and before had never felt that "the fact that they lived in an unfashionable neighborhood," or anything else about how they chose to present themselves or spend their money "was something that they had never been made to feel to their personal disadvantage" (Howells 24). However, when the Coreys had come to call on the Laphams, their driver "had not known the way exactly" to their home because "'they had never been in [their] part of town before'" (Howells 29). Although no explicit critique was made of the Laphams's dwelling, it was made clear to Persis and Irene that "the fact that they lived in an unfashionable neighborhood was something . . . to their personal disadvantage" if they wished to truly integrate into society (Howells 24).

Persis convinces her husband to build on a lot of land in Back Bay, the elite neighborhood where all the notable Bostonian families live. Both Persis and Lapham become more and more emotionally invested in the premise of a new home on the property, especially when it comes to securing his generational legacy for his daughters. As Persis and Silas cruise through the streets of Back Bay, they both become inspired as they imagine what their new house would be like, conceiving that their "'girls [wouldn't] look very bad behind one of those big panes'" typical of the extravagant Back Bay homes (Howells 34). Framed by the ritzy windows, his daughters would be displayed as evidence of Lapham's success, existing in the correct sphere and tastes of

the world in which they desire to belong. The house will serve as the setting for courtship, social gatherings, and marriage. Over and above being a display of their financial success, the new home will be a launching pad for the generations of Laphams to come.

Just as schooling is distinctive for its aesthetic properties and its transformative, internalized properties, to have the outer distinction without the inner cultivation dooms the Laphams to mere imitation. This shameless effort at imitation is made manifest in the way they go about designing their new house on Back Bay. In many American novels that follow the rise of self-made men, architecture plays an important role in pronouncing their fortunes. Critic Claire Preston argues that “the descriptive and emblematic properties of the buccaneer house” serve as “territorial marker[s] and index[es] of the socially ambitious” (Preston 104).

Overwhelming wealth “converted into real estate” is an effective way to “display . . . purchasing power and patronage” for the entire world to see (Preston 104). Although these architectural monstrosities, most concerned in “advertising . . . the exhaustless bank account which funds it,” often do so at the cost of taste; they are “loaded with architectural references and arguments which are incoherent, defiant of any developed rationale of style or purpose” (Preston 104). The Laphams, too, fall prey to tasteless expressions of their wealth. At different moments the text ridicules the Laphams’s taste; Mrs. Lapham buys herself “rich and rather ugly clothes” and they adorned their previous home with “the costliest and most abominable frescoes” (Howells 25). The Laphams also “had a crude taste in architecture” and, while riding through Back Bay to draw inspiration from the different homes on either side of the street, the narrator derisively comments that “they admired the worst” of them (Howells 34). The Laphams know that they want the best that money can buy, but they have no discernment to help them navigate between what is tasteful and what is just expensive.

Moreover, it is not just that the Laphams incline toward ugly aesthetics, but that their tastes, no matter how off the mark, are not authentically their own. It is the price tag as well as their personal observations that inform them to what is in style. Persis and Silas derive their tastes in architecture through the cost, personal observation of what seems trendy, and from what others espouse. For instance, Lapham is set on building a house with “black-walnut finish, high-studding, and cornices” as “in the style” of the day, but not because he has genuinely taken to it, but because that style’s popularity is confirmed by “a master-builder who had put up a great many houses on the Back Bay” (Howells 40). Lapham’s pronounced taste is not an internal taste, but an mimicked expression of what he observes to be popular around him.

That the Laphams’s taste is imitated and not internalized allows their hired architect to intervene as their guide to culture. As a self-made man, Lapham has yet to face the limitations of what his money could buy for him. The delusion that his money has the limitless power to purchase even taste continues when the Laphams hire an architect, as tastemaker, to make their new home perfect. When confronted with Lapham’s atrociously faddish inclinations, the architect proves “skillful, as nearly all architects are, in playing upon that simple instrument Man” and redirecting Lapham’s preferences toward his own timeless, refined alternatives (Howells 40). He gently gleans Lapham from his woefully trendy vision, claiming that though popular now, ““the ugly things...stay out after they’ve had their day”” (Howells 42).

Part of the architect’s skill is not just saving the Laphams’s home from “the ugly things that stay out after they’ve had their day,” but by letting Lapham think that the architect’s ideas are more or less his own (Howells 42). Indeed, Lapham came to feel as if “he had discovered the fellow...and owned him now, and the fellow did nothing to disturb this impression” (Howells 43). Just as Lapham believed he truly wanted the black walnut atrocities, the architect allows him

to believe that his taste shifted on his own regard to favor what the architect idealistically perceives as the “really beautiful things [that] can’t go out” (Howells 42). In paying for the architect’s services, what Lapham is actually purchasing is the impression that he himself has good taste.

This dynamic of tastemakers and artists making way for the self-made man reveals an economic and social shift that seems to disrupt a traditional order of class. In the new economic landscape, men can get rich quick and purchase the imitation of whatever culture they desire. In this system, tastemakers like “architects and the musicians” are serviced to those with money to make those patrons feel as if they are ones endowed with this sensitive “inner consciousness” (Howells 192). The artists who are praised because they “create form” authentically are lowered in their business patronage to the newly rich, those without tastes who merely “try to imitate... try to represent” (Howells 192). The tastemakers’ authentic art is commodified into a social currency that degrades the artist, the buyer, and the art itself.

Preston investigates how existing social atmospheres are transformed by the mobility of the suddenly rich as seen in the popular genre of “the money-novel” that appears in the late-nineteenth century. The suddenly rich, or “the buccaneer,” as she calls the nouveau riches in her analysis, are put directly at odds with the “hierarchies of birth,” or those who gained their “social prominence... [by] lineage,” like the Corey clan (Preston 99). Money, as lorded by these “wealthy new invaders,” “overwhelmed” the classist structure previously enjoyed by “social aboriginals” (Preston 100). It is money’s threatening power to “[evaporate] class and hereditary distinction,” and “[to allow] its possessors to ignore or transcend social boundaries” that allows these buccaneer characters to “grab whatever they like” and “brutally [expose]” the “weaknesses of the old élites” (Preston 100, 103). As Bromfield Corey, a representative of the “social

aboriginals” or “old élites” remarks wistfully: “the suddenly rich are on a level with any of us nowadays. Money buys position at once... it’s the romance, the poetry of our age. It’s the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination” (Preston 100, 103, Howells 64). Bromfield’s statement is ironic, not sincere. It expresses a regret that the “suddenly rich,” like the Laphams, believe they can use their money to “[buy] position at once” (Howells 64). Although the events of the novel prove that Lapham cannot truly buy himself position, they also demonstrate the havoc wreaked upon the social order in his attempts. The perspective that culture and art can be bought instantly devalues both the art and the history of prestige behind it. In doing so, money doesn’t just buy but rather *becomes* “the romance, the poetry of [the] age,” meaning that the actual romance and poetry is regretfully lost in the exchange, and, as Preston iterates, represents not only the changes in the economic climate, but a threat to social disruption as well (Howells 64).

The relationship between Lapham and the architect demonstrates the way a man like Lapham, lacking true appreciation for the styles that he’s endorsing, could delude himself into thinking he is endowed with the very finest tastes simply because he has paid for them. Lapham boasts that he’s “building a house to suit [himself]” even though the house is no longer being built in the style Lapham had originally (thought he had) desired (Howells 54). Furthermore, the architect’s sneaking dissemination of his own taste unto Lapham perpetuates the illusion in Lapham’s mind that his money is truly limitless in its power. He brags that “you can’t have a nice house for nothing” and that if you “give an architect money enough...he’ll give you a nice house, every time” (Howells 55).

In part this is true; money makes legitimate culture more accessible. However, Lapham’s acquisition of his new, refined home does not equate to his actual appreciation of its exquisite styles. Instead, Lapham is “reasonably led on from one outlay to another” for no other reason

than “feel[ing] the beautiful effect intended” (Howells 128). Both “outlay[s]” and “beautiful effect[s]” suggest a surface-level inclination brought on by mere impression and “feel[ing]” (Howells 128). Lapham can feel the intention of the architecture, yet he cannot understand the form that brings about the feelings elicited. Bourdieu would classify Lapham’s engagement with architecture the “popular aesthetic” taste, which “implies subordination of form to function” (Bourdieu 4). The popular masses do not interact with art through analysis of form— the effects of syntax, camera angles, brush strokes, etc.— but by how the impression of the art makes them *feel*. The higher-class spectator, on the other hand, by studying the formal conventions encoded into the art, can engage with the art at a distance and in a way that “[prevents] him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters,” of say, a play (Bourdieu 4). Bourdieu theorizes that such intimate and unintellectual connection to art on the part of the vulgar masses is because they do not have the social luxury to learn to look at art from an intellectual distance. That Lapham can only seem to engage with cultural capital in a way that subordinates/reduces “form to function” creates a social problem.

Tom Corey compassionately identifies this limitation within Lapham and, in conversation with his father, excuses Lapham’s rough manners by asking rhetorically, “how can you expect people who have been strictly devoted to business to be grammatical?” However, Tom *does* expect a higher level of refinement from Silas Lapham once he feels seriously about potentially melding himself to his family through marriage (Howells 64). Lapham’s inability to rightly appreciate and read cultural capital widens the gulf between the Coreys and the Laphams, and it lies in Tom Corey’s hands to choose to cover the gap through marriage. Tom has fallen in love with Lapham’s daughter Pen, and, as so much of Lapham’s crudeness offends him, realizes that “it had become a vital necessity with him to think the best of Lapham” (Howells 211).

It is for Penelope's sake that he can suppress his "allegiance to the exclusiveness to which he was born and bred" and lower himself "by the force of will" to submit to equality with Lapham and treat him with graciousness and respect (Howells 211). The difficulty that Tom experiences in bridging the gap between his upbringing and that of the Laphams reveals the conflict and also the necessity of the two families combining. Tom must surrender his reactionary repulsion and inclination to "superfinely [stand] aloof" from Lapham's offensive hysterics for the sake of potential union with his daughter (Howells 211). Just as Silas Lapham needs Thomas Corey to ensure his generational place, Tom needs Lapham for the completion of his personal happiness.

Lapham's plebeian desire for his art to do nothing more than entertain comes through similarly in his engagement with literature. As his daughters and Tom Corey discuss popular novels— books that the girls have only heard of through the talk around town— Lapham interjects:

"I can't get time for books. It's as much as I can do to keep up with the newspapers; and when the night comes, I'm tired, and I'd rather go out to the theatre, or a lecture, if they've got a good stereopticon to give you views of the places. But I guess we all like a play better than 'most anything else. I want something that'll make me laugh. I don't believe in tragedy. I think there's enough of that in real life without putting it on a stage."
(Howells 88)

Lapham's life as a self-made businessman allows him to afford luxuries of the leisure class yet, as he sees it, is too demanding of him for him to be able to develop the tastes of the society in which his wealth has elevated him. He "can't get time for books" in his busy schedule and is too "tired" from a long day of work to put forth the intellectual labor necessary to engage with

literature in the evening (Howells 88). Lapham instead prefers the more vulgar forms of popular entertainment like the theatre or a lecture with pictures that merely require sitting back and consuming passively. Such entertainment operates primarily as a distraction and an escape from reality. Lapham can conceive of no other purpose for art than for entertainment; why would someone want tragedy if “there’s enough of that in real life already?” (Howells 88).

The Coreys, however, provide a counterargument to the significance of literature that espouses it as the defining characteristic of civilization and the civilized person. According to them, “all civilization comes through literature,” and one “must read or...must barbarize” (Howells 118). As a verb, to “barbarize” implies that if one is not reading and cultivating oneself, then one is actively devolving toward a more barbaric state. In this view, there’s no neutrality in any kind of cultural consumption. For instance, in regard to Lapham’s taste for the theatre, Bromfield Corey expresses “doubt if the theatre is a factor in civilization,” and though it might not necessarily “deprave a great deal,” it is certainly “intellectually degrading” (Howells 118). According to the Coreys, Lapham’s consumption of theatre is not a harmless, mindless entertainment, but is actually “degrading” his intellect (Howells 118). Lapham’s choice of entertainment only serves to further enhance the gulf between the self-made man and those who are civilized readers, like the Coreys (Howells 118).

Unlike Lapham, who is content with his newspapers and theatre, his daughters seem to perceive the important, cultural consequences of sophisticated literary consumption, although both daughters engage with the labor of cultivating their literacy quite differently. Irene’s relationship with literature is a lot like her father’s relationship with architecture— she understands its aesthetic cultural value, yet mistakenly believes that it is enough to purchase the proper taste without actually cultivating the proper taste. Having no actual, internal literary taste,

Irene “depended on...her sister [Pen] for her opinions, almost her sensations” (Howells 27).

When Irene talks to Tom Corey, she really only talks about Penelope and Penelope’s opinions.

Pen is Irene’s only connection to culture, and only point of commonality with Tom Corey. Pen is capable of talking to Tom about “literary topics,” whereas Irene can talk to Tom only of the literary opinion espoused by her older sister (Howells 87).

Knowing that literature is a link to the social sphere in which Tom belongs, Irene does her best to relate, despite her own limitations. She asks Tom to help her choose the important titles to fill the library that will be in their new house. Her desire to fill her library with the proper books are not necessarily for her to read them, but because ““nothing furnishes a room like books”” (Howells 112). Irene wants the right books merely for their aesthetic contributions to her reputation. In her mind, it is enough that she can brandish the right titles and authors and not so much internalize the ideas contained within them. This aesthetic consideration is demonstrated with her preoccupation with whether the books ought to be displayed on ““book-cases”” or ““shelves”” so that ““nice bindings...will look very well”” and decorate the space the best (Howells 112).

It’s only after the surface-level consideration of aesthetics that Irene thinks about what books ought to be on display, and still that consideration does not go beyond how owning the right books will make Irene appear educated and culturally proficient, not actually become culturally proficient through her reading of them. Irene must rely on Tom Corey’s education to inform her own literary taste the way her father relies on the architect for his architectural tastes. Despite their wealth and ability to buy whatever art or cultural capital they see social value in, the Laphams lack the ability to authentically value and appreciate the cultural capital for its form alone, outside of its social significance. In this way, rather than their “taste” in high culture

making them *distinct* from the common families from which they came, their taste is merely *an imitation* of the high culture they see around them.

However, not every member of the Lapham family fails to understand or complete their cultural labor satisfactorily; Pen is on her way to culture, and better yet, labors not out of ulterior social motives but from an internal, authentic interest. Her “whole family [is] amazed at the number she read[s], and rather proud of it,” but they do not goad her into it, nor is her reading a compulsory part of her education. Rather she elects to take “private lessons and read books out of the circulating library” (Howells 26). Also, as Pen “did not care for society, apparently,” she doesn’t read to amass the cultural capital that could allow her to succeed in society (Howells 27). Instead, Pen’s consumption of literature is for her own sake. That Penelope’s cultural work comes out of an authentic interest in reading for her own sake inadvertently draws Tom Corey toward her. Being of a higher, cultured class himself, he connects to Pen because her cultural labor elevates her to his level; she has thoughtful ideas and they can discuss “literary topics” in a way that is meaningful (Howells 87).

Penelope exists at a cross section of culture and her backwoods roots, an intersection that is richened by her name. The name Penelope has a classical namesake: the faithful wife of the Greek hero Odysseus. Also, as Andrea Powell notices in “The Shaping of the New Woman in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” Penelope is also the name of a character in Frances Fuller Victor’s 1877 novella, “The New Penelope.” In “The New Penelope,” the title character “‘struggles against the marital bonds that circumscribe her social identity,’” endowing the very name Penelope with implication to the “resistance to traditional gender roles and assumptions about female identity” (Victor 40, Powell 67). This image of the New Woman is an emergent feminine ideal in the late-nineteenth century characterized by the “woman’s need to break free of her

housed and familial duties and to pursue personal fulfillment through a variety of venues, including charity work and physical activity” (Powell 60). Like the New Woman, Pen finds value beyond her physical appearance, marriageability, and domestic labor.

However, as Powell argues, Penelope “is not as much like the New Woman as she originally appears to be,” and that is reflected in her name as well; Penelope “was named after her [paternal] grandmother,” a woman whom Silas Lapham praises as the pinnacle of anti-modern womanhood. Lapham recalls with sentimental fondness that his mother ““cooked, swept, washed, ironed, made and mended from daylight till dark--and from dark till daylight, I was going to say; for I don't know how she got any time for sleep. But I suppose she did... she was *good*” (Howells 6). Although Penelope has traits and interests that go beyond the role of the domestic anti-modern femininity, it is her New Woman traits and her culture that paradoxically make her a suitable housewife for Tom Corey, a new kind of cultured self-made man who needs a woman with literary tendencies to support him in the way an older-generation self-made man needed a woman who could support him domestically.

It is Pen’s marriage to Tom Corey that does not elevate her, but rather threatens to reduce her from her station as a New Woman to a sniveling, sentimental cliché. As David Leverenz explains in *Paternalism Incorporated*, Penelope is “[punished]...when the prospect of marrying Tom Corey threatens to give her entry into the Boston elite” by the transformation of her character from a New Woman with “droll realism” to a character marked by “sentimental angst” (Leverenz 59, 60). In order to transgress class boundaries, or, as Leverenz suggests, as punishment for such passing, Penelope must submit her humor that “expose[d] conventions while accommodating to them,” for a “new role as a sentimental icon of womanly tears and virtue” (Leverenz 59, 61). Although Penelope does revert to conventionalism half way through

the novel, it is not, as Leverenz suggests, a permanent shift to her character as punishment for defying class constructs, but a symptom of being limited by extreme ideologies of her parents and Tom's parents. Within their limited frameworks of proper social behavior, neither the Laphams nor the Coreys know what to do with Pen's unconventional, modern personality. The new couple must escape to Mexico to create space between themselves and the stifling older generation and find a new frontier for Tom's business enterprises and their own modern values. In fact, by the end of the novel, with Tom and Pen in Mexico, the Laphams returning to Vermont, and the Coreys remaining in Boston, all three families occupy different spaces representative of their respective social trajectories.

Despite her heightened sensitivity to culture, Penelope, like her parents and sister, misunderstands what form of cultural capital, the aesthetic or the substance, is most potent for their social integration. The Laphams assume that Tom Corey would fall in love with Irene for all her beauty and style, when really, he finds interest in *Pen* for her ideas, cultivation, and substance. Mrs. Lapham realizes this, in part. She knows that Irene "isn't really equal to [Tom]... she hasn't mind enough," but she doesn't go as far to say that "a man [falls] in love with a girl's intellect" (Howells 124). All four Laphams fail to realize that the substantive cultural labor of Pen is more valuable than the aesthetic labor rooted in Irene's appearance for the purpose of social integration. This misunderstanding proves treacherous in their attainment of the social achievements they desire.

Although books and architecture are tangible ways the Laphams attempt to acquire cultural capital, their relationship to Tom Corey is their most salient potential link for fully integrating into society. Tom is a Corey, and, as Marchand remarks, was raised with the "early exposure to high culture" that "serves as a permanent marker of class difference" (Marchand 297). Despite

his namesake and upbringing, Tom is not described as the same kind of artistic intellectual as his father. Bromfield remarks that “[Tom] has plenty of the kind of sense which we call horse; but he isn’t brilliant. No, Tom is not brilliant” (Howells 94). While Tom fails to resemble his father, he conforms to both the physical image and temperament of his grandfather. Both “grandfather and grandson had...the Roman nose” that represented the spirit of self-making enterprise (Howells 69). However, in Tom’s case, “he had the Roman nose and the energy without the opportunity” (Howells 71). Tom attempts to self-start yet finds himself continually falling back on the family wealth. For this reason, Tom, a blend of aristocratic refinement and self-making energy, finds himself drawn to the industrious opportunities available by going into business with Lapham.

In *Paternalism Incorporated*, Leverenz takes interest in how powerful father figures and paternalistic relationships are important in shaping the seemingly individualistic American self-made man. As a sort of business mentor—and future father-in-law—to Tom, Lapham is in a unique position to bring out the self-made qualities of the grandfather Corey that, though skipping Bromfield, lay latent in Tom and his symbolic Roman nose. Although Lapham sees incredible enterprising potential in Tom that he wants to bring out of him, Silas also has more self-serving motives for fathering the young Corey. Leverenz recognizes that Lapham and Tom’s “father-son” relationship functions primarily to bolster Lapham’s own anxieties “about being fraudulent or unmanly in performing genteel etiquette” (Leverenz 97). In this way, their paternalistic relationship is somewhat flipped. Tom, a social insider, helps Lapham navigate the confusing maze of manners and mores of the upper-class that are foreign to the self-made man. But, more than just reassurance of his manliness and social respectability, Lapham identifies that Tom’s potential as both a business partner and a prospective son-in-law offers expanded

opportunities for the solidification of Lapham's generational legacy. These connections to Tom, especially through marriage, would secure the fruit of his work and success for his future generations. Mrs. Lapham first meets Tom the summer she met the Corey women, and Silas makes his acquaintance when the young man calls on Irene in the skeleton of the new home Lapham is building. Lapham, who "had the pride which comes of self-making," feels ambivalently toward the Coreys, and suspicious at Tom's appearance at his home (Howells 108). Lapham knew of the prominent Bostonian family "very well, and, in his simple, brutal way, he had long hated their name as a symbol of splendor which, unless he should live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint, he could not hope to realize in his own" (Howells 92). Lapham acknowledges resentfully that his hard work, ambition, and success cannot compete with the generational legacy encompassed in the Corey name. For his own familial reputation, it would take "at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint" to produce descendants who would no longer be just superficially "gilded" but authentically made up of the right stuff and carry the same distinction of "splendor" as the Coreys (Howells 92).

Lapham triumphs over his ambivalence toward the "sterile elegance" embodied by the Coreys by vowing that he "could make a man of that fellow, if [he] had [Tom] in the business with [him]" (Howells 145, 58-59). The tension between amassing Tom as a business partner and Tom as a son-in-law reveals the tension between Lapham's pride in asserting his individual self-interest and the interest of his daughters and generational legacy. This wavering allegiance between self and family is also exposed at the infamous dinner party, when Lapham forgets the meaning of the dinner for furthering his daughters and makes it about his own getting ahead. Lapham brags about taking Tom under his wing in his business in, as Leverenz concludes, an

“attempt to override class differences” that he both “envies and despise” (Leverenz 100).

Lapham’s prideful transgression of class brings out “Tom’s vivid private ferocity” that protects his pride in his “lower layer of... class identification” (Leverenz 101). Rather than make a man of Tom Corey by mentoring him in business, Leverenz argues that “Tom becomes ‘a man’ by preparing to defend his class against Silas’s lack of both manliness and class” (Leverenz 101). Leverenz exposes the folly of Lapham seeking paternal dominance of Corey in the business world as a means of social equilibrium.

This social equilibrium is sought at another level than just business, but also in potentially yoking his progeny to the Corey name. By marriage, Lapham could speed up the genealogical process toward cultivation that, on its own, would have taken “at least three generations” (Howells 92). In the face of this, Lapham’s indignant pride yields to his ambition. He realizes that Tom Corey could be the best thing to happen to his family name:

He could see the young people down on the rocks, and his heart swelled in his breast. He had always said that he did not care what a man’s family was, but the presence of young Corey as an applicant to him for employment, as his guest, as the possible suitor of his daughter, was one of the sweetest flavors that he had yet tasted in his success. (Howells 92)

When faced with the potential of yoking his progeny to the Corey name, all of the “splendor” that was perceived to be inaccessible to his own name for “at least three generations” becomes a more immediate possibility (Howells 92). As a proud individual who had made his own name out of nothing, Lapham had never before had to “care what a man’s family was” (Howells 92). In fact, if he did care, he could not have respected or valued his own self-made story. However, his priorities as a self-made man are shifting. With his career having blossomed and his family in

tow, Lapham no longer must attend only to his individual success, but also to the establishment of his family name and legacy. Name begins to matter to Lapham, and so, therefore, does Tom Corey's name as a tool for the securing of his own name.

Because the new goal of Lapham's is social it requires the erasure of his self-made status; his self-madeness would die with him, and Lapham would no longer represent his business legacy, but the aristocratic authority like the Coreys. Although, in his self-made pride, families like the Coreys had repulsed Lapham and "he had made up his mind [negatively] about young Corey beforehand," Lapham yields to his social ambitions when he sees Tom as "an applicant to him for employment" and as a "possible suitor for his daughter" (Howells 92). The business connection, which would precipitate the marital connection, validates Lapham's ego as a self-made man. He is delighted at the prospect of taking the son of Bromfield Corey—the aristocratic loafer who "spent his youth abroad and his father's money everywhere, and done nothing but say smart things—" and "mak[ing] a man of that fellow" (Howells 92, 58). Tom's father, as established before, stands for "everything that was offensively aristocratic" and also all the splendor that was inaccessible to someone of Lapham's pedigree (Howells 92). That the son of such a man would choose to join Lapham's enterprise and enter into his way of living boosts Lapham's own view of his self-made labor in comparison to prestigious cultural labor of Tom's father.

More than anything else, however, it is the prospect of acquiring a Corey as a son-in-law that the Laphams have "set [their] heart on" (Howells 91). Marriage allows for a powerful and permanent integration that would allow the Laphams to plant themselves perfectly in the Bostonian elite. This kind of union goes beyond money, and into the kind of wealth that money cannot buy—a generational dynasty. However, the hope that Lapham carries to this permanent,

genealogical, and biological merge between his kin and the near-royalty of the Corey line, is risky. The potential for Tom as a son-in-law is so ideal in securing Lapham's generational legacy and so impossible to control that Lapham's pride keeps him from outwardly embracing his hope. He feigns to his wife as if such a union "had not occurred to him before" and that he wants their relation to Tom to be about "paint first, last, and all the time" (Howells 90). Though for the sake of his pride Lapham cannot afford to have his heart set upon this union, while watching his daughters with Tom, that hope—"one of the sweetest flavors that he had yet tasted in his success"—cannot help but take flower (Howells 92). However, in his misunderstanding, Lapham stakes this hope erroneously on the aesthetic Irene rather than the cultured Pen.

The new cultural labors of house-building, book-collecting, and networking are taken up with the intensity and immediacy of the Lapham's middle-class work ethic, and with the optimism that they are well on their way to achieving their societal goal as if it were any other economic benchmark they had achieved before. However, a problem emerges; despite all the money and effort they throw at their social pursuits, the Laphams run up against class barriers that see through their imitations.

The Laphams begin to breakdown with the unease that follows an invitation to dinner from the Coreys. This invitation could be considered a sign of the Laphams's cultural success, and Lapham certainly takes it as such at first. The invitation implies an acknowledgement of their growing intimacy with Tom, and therefore a budding connection between the two families. The Laphams understand both the hope and risk contained in the prospect of dinner, and that risk has to do with the future of their families and generational legacies. The unspoken relational dynamic at play is the potentiality for marriage between Tom and one of the Lapham daughters. Reaching for multigenerational success in this way signifies a large step in the career of a self-

made man. The expansion of family through marriage transforms the self-made man's enterprise from being contained within the individual into a family-centered, multigenerational concept of success. Preston calls the generation following the self-made man, or his children's generation, "the next phase" (Preston 104). This terminology expresses how the self-made man and his success is not completed in his life time but continues to be represented by what he leaves his children and what his children do with what they inherit. Although the self-made man's greatness was made possible by succeeding in the world without an inheritance, at the end of his life, his greatness is determined in proportion to the inheritance he is able to leave his own children.

Setting up his daughters and future generations for success is as much a part of Lapham's duties as a self-made man as his individual success. Therefore, the Laphams experience this growing intimacy with the Coreys as a promise of their greatest ambitions. The Coreys, on the other hand, perceive it as a threat to their cultivated reputation. In the Lapham's eyes, dinner is an opportunity to get their daughters ahead, particularly by solidifying a courtship between Tom and Irene. According to the Coreys, the dinner is a chance to terminate any such romantic— and therefore generational— possibilities. Although Bromfield finds the "whole Lapham tribe... distasteful," and his wife, Anna, "would be chiefly annoyed by the Lapham connection" to their family, the Coreys choose to invite the Laphams to dinner because they know that they "can't ignore Tom's intimacy" with the Laphams and believe that "perhaps...[dinner] would be the best way of curing Tom of his fancy, if he has one" (Howell 268, 269, 170). Perhaps, his parents presume, if Tom could see the Laphams's barbarism highlighted at dinner, he might come to realize that he would desire to marry someone "more cultivated" than a Lapham (Howells 170).

Both the Lapham's fragile hope and the Coreys's agitated paranoia represent the generational implications of the dinner that go beyond the question of social behaviors and tastes.

Persis becomes overwhelmed by all the preparations necessary for dinner and realizes all of the social nuances and etiquette that she hasn't a grasp on. Mrs. Lapham's insecurity about the dinner arrangement is rooted in her increasing awareness that she and her family do not belong at the Coreys's table and will only make fools of themselves by trying. She expresses her anxieties about being undone by their own cultural ignorance to Lapham, saying:

“...I want to do the best we can for the children but I don't know what we're going to talk about to those people when we get there. We haven't got anything in common with them... we're different from those people. They're well-meaning enough, and they'd excuse it, I presume, but we're too old to learn to be like them.” (Howells 180-181)

This passage represents Mrs. Lapham's insights into the ways she and her family are in over their heads when it comes to actually participating in the Coreys's world. In just preparing for the dinner— not even attending it yet— she realizes she doesn't understand the proper way to write a formal letter, that she has no idea what is appropriate to wear to a dinner party, and that they, as simple country folk, won't have enough in common with their hosts to participate in table-talk without embarrassing themselves. Most of her anxiety, however, is about her and her husband's place at the table. She supposes that she and Silas are “too old to learn to be like them,” but then, by implication, suggests that maybe it's not too late for her daughters (Howells 181).

This line regarding the role of the parents versus the role of the children gives insight into a generational significance of the dinner party. Critics agree that the dinner scene is a central and significant, if not the most central and significant scene in the entire novel. As Thomas Tanselle

notices in “The Architecture of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” that the dinner scene occurs, geographically, as the central chapter in the book, and that the physical placement symbolizes the chapter’s function in the work. Tanselle argues that “the dinner is a point of equilibrium with the Coreys and the Laphams meeting ostensibly as equals, and the conversation there draws together all the threads of the book,” and that overall, it functions to “[turn] the direction of the story” (Tanselle 443). Marchand argues that the dinner contains “a series of situations that Howells constructs to demonstrate the impossibility of acquiring upper-class behaviors through, in his words, ‘servile imitation’” (Marchand 300). The Laphams never have the chance to be equal to the Coreys, and any illusion that the Laphams had that they could be is unmistakably disproved in the crucible of the dinner scene. Regardless of their differing interpretations, both Marchand and Tanselle understand the significance and effectiveness of the dinner scene in demonstrating the Laphams’s efforts of social imitation.

Beyond matters of social faux pas, however, the dinner scene also highlights the generational problem at stake for a self-made man. This dinner, after all, isn’t for Mr. and Mrs. Lapham, but for the purpose of “do[ing] the best [they] can for the children” (Howells 181). This social integration is not merely for Persis’s and Silas’s own pride, as they are “too old” to experience the benefits of culture themselves but is rather for the benefit of their daughters and the following generations. The dinner is, in actuality, about the potential union between the two families. The Coreys perceive this potential union as a threat to their dignity, whereas the Laphams regard it with anxious hope, staking all of their social aspirations upon a possible marriage.

Although Persis and Silas understand the gravity of the dinner, they misunderstand it by supposing that Irene, for her aesthetic distinction, is the daughter with marriageable potential,

when in reality it's Penelope, in her substantive acculturation, that is their best candidate. The Laphams miss the mark completely on this front, as they fail to even bring Penelope with them to the dinner. Furthermore, things begin to unravel when Lapham, self-made man, loses sight of this new social goal and instead tries to shift the focus of the dinner to personal approval of himself. The frustration, insecurity, and desperation bred from his inability to contribute meaningfully to conversation leads Lapham to overcompensate by taking attention away from his daughters. He perceives the importance of being able to talk well at a dinner party, and yet misses the *point* of talking, and holds the conversation hostage. In a drunken and insecure fog, he forgets that the issue at hand is genealogical, yet insists on just talking about himself:

As he cast off all fear, his voice rose, and he hammered his arm-chair with the thick of his hand for emphasis. Mr. Corey seemed impressed; he sat perfectly quiet, listening, and Lapham saw the other gentlemen stop in their talk every now and then to listen. After this proof of his ability to interest them, he would have liked to have Mrs. Lapham suggest again that he was unequal to their society, or to the society of anybody else. He surprised himself by his ease among men whose names had hitherto overawed him. He got to calling Bromfield Corey by his surname alone. He did not understand why young Corey seemed to be preoccupied, and he took the occasion to tell the company how he had said to his wife the first time he saw that fellow that he could make a man of him if he had him in the business and he guessed he was not mistaken. He began to tell stories of the different young men he had had in his employ. At last he had the talk altogether to himself; no one else talked, and he talked unceasingly. It was a great time; it was a triumph. (Howells 205)

Lapham believes that their attention was “proof of his ability to interest them,” when really, it’s a testament to his inappropriate, drunken domination of the conversation (Howells 205). With what he incorrectly judges as camaraderie, Lapham rudely assumes an intimacy with Bromfield Corey by calling him “by his surname alone,” and embarrasses himself further by forcing each man to “drop in and see him at his office” and gushing about how ““it had always been his ambition to know [them]”” (Howells 205, 206). Lapham believes he has won the approval and admiration of these gentlemen and sees that as yet another accomplishment of his self-made career.

By treating the dinner as an event about business practices, Lapham loses sight of his obligations to his children. He sacrifices what before was called “one of the sweetest flavors that he had yet tasted in his success” in order to boost his own ego, and in turn ends up hurting his children’s prospects by making himself “a perfect laughing-stock” among the gentlemen (Howells 92, 185). Instead of revealing class difference, for Marchand, the dinner scene’s “importance lies in how it spells the end of the Laphams’ social ambitions” (Marchand 291). Lapham attempts to use the dinner to further his family’s standing in the strata of Boston elites, yet his inappropriate behavior only demonstrates to both his hosts and to himself that such social mobility is unattainable to the uncultivated self-made man. The day following the dinner party, Lapham is repentant for his boorish behavior and grovels for Tom Corey’s forgiveness, admitting that at the dinner he “showed that [he] wasn’t fit to go with” the other gentlemen (Howells 209).

With their social ambitions quickly diffused, the Laphams fall back into their previous—and appropriate—place in the social hierarchy. This proper place in the universe is not just social, but geographic as well. The Laphams return to their old family estate in Vermont. The

estate in Vermont is described as “plain” and furnished with “all the necessities, but no luxuries, unless the statues of Prayer and Faith might be considered” (Howells 363). Just as the Lapham’s gaudy house project was symbolic of their equally ostentatious social aspirations, the antiquated farm house to which the Laphams return after their financial devastation reveals their return to anti-modern values and humble living. As detailed by “the statues of Prayer and Faith,” this materialistic ruin results, paradoxically, in a moral rise (Howells 363).

In fact, a prominent reading among critics is that the title *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is not an ironical snub at Lapham’s glaring social and material ruin, but a genuine interpretation of the moral transformation experienced by the titular character. Köseman argues that after the dinner party, Lapham quits his class ambitions not just because his social goals are unattainable but because of an autonomous shift in priorities. She says that “although Lapham considered the attainment of monetary wealth as success before the dinner party, he came to evaluate success as moral perfection after that” (Köseman 181). Following the dinner party and the subsequent deterioration of his speculative investments, Lapham finds that he cannot rely on the external measures of social status or financial capital as a determination of his success. Instead, moral integrity becomes a more valuable form of capital than material or social gain, and the new method by which he can measure his success.

This shift from outward measures of success to inward, character-based measures is less of an evolution of the definition of success but rather a return to anti-modern conceptions of success. As Leverenz remarks, Lapham’s “fortunate fall from his desire for upward mobility” results in the “[restoration of his] rural character” (Leverenz 101). The social mobility of the Laphams throughout the novel is linked to physical mobility; for instance, the first thing the Laphams do to instigate their social rise in Boston is to move to Back Bay to live amongst the

Bostonian elites. In the same way, their moral mobility is also represented by geographic movement, when, at the end of the novel, they return to the rural family estate in Vermont. Lapham can reconnect to his prelapsarian character by leaving Boston, the home of his toxic ambitions, and returning to the home where he was raised according to the old-fashioned virtues of simplicity, honesty, and disciplined hard-work.

Lapham's personal redemption requires a return to the pre-modern simplicity he embodied before his self-made success, particularly when it comes to family. In losing everything financially and socially, the Laphams are able to "[return] to something like their old, united life; they were at least all together again" (Marchand 291, Howells 351). Pen, of course, leaves the family unit to marry Tom, but the statement remains true metaphorically. Through her marriage to Tom Corey, Pen remains connected to Lapham as she continues the business and social legacy of Lapham's former upward mobility. Because Lapham's social strivings are erased in his return to authentic, anti-modern values, by the time Pen marries Tom at the end of the novel, "neither [Lapham] nor his wife thought now that their daughter was marrying a Corey; they thought only that she was giving herself to the man who loved her" (Tansell 452, Howells 359). Lapham can look with satisfaction upon the marriage not out of his selfish desire to make a legacy for himself but for her own happiness. In the light of such worldly ruin, family— whether they be near or far— becomes all the Laphams have and all that they need.

Regardless of whether Lapham's return to anti-modern authenticity is read as a rise or a fall, this ending of the novel does reveal the limitations for self-made men in this period of history. Between the years of 1870 and 1910, industrial changes in the American economic order began to limit the opportunities available for ambitious young men to increase their station by honest means. In *Character is Capital*, Judy Hilkey examines the surge of "success manuals"

that appeared en masse between these years as a preventative effort to keep ambitious young men from sacrificing moral character while in the pursuit of getting ahead financially and socially. The prevalence of success manuals during this time speaks to a social crisis among American citizens, particularly “native-born, Protestant, rural and small-town” men like Lapham whose “[ideologies] of self-reliance and self-sufficiency” were no longer effective in actualizing monetary or social achievement in the new industrialized economic order (Hilkey 11).

These success manuals proffer character as a *replacement* for economic or social success by promoting a return to Christianized, pre-modern virtues such as honesty, simplicity, and industry as determinate of success over and above economic or social dominance. With success redefined as the refinement of character, any mediocre man is empowered with the potential to get ahead in the stunted social order of Gilded Age America. In this way, men did not have to flee from their adversity by whatever means possible, as adversity like the kind the Laphams face becomes a boon for the moral aspirant. Adversity creates “circumstances that built character,” which, according to authors of success manuals at this time, is the ultimate form of capital (Hilkey 103). Adversity makes the self-made man a self-made man; without obstacles, there could be no success, achievement, or story.

Owning or Rejecting the Self-Made Story

"Oh, there isn't really very much more to say about the paint itself. But you can use it for almost anything where a paint is wanted, inside or out. It'll prevent decay, and it'll stop it, after it's begun, in tin or iron. You can paint the inside of a cistern or a bath-tub with it, and water won't hurt it; and you can paint a steam-boiler with it, and heat won't. You can cover a brick wall with it, or a railroad car, or the deck of a steamboat, and you can't do a better thing for either."

"Never tried it on the human conscience, I suppose," suggested Bartley.

"No, sir," replied Lapham gravely. "I guess you want to keep that as free from paint as you can, if you want much use of it. I never cared to try any of it on mine."

— W. D. HOWELLS, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*³

As self-made men from humble origins, both Lapham and Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* were inherently born into adversity. Their pre-histories— both their content and how they are told in the novels— reveal how similar the two eponymous characters' starts were and how differently they engaged with their given lot. Although Lapham wrestles with the limitations of being a self-made man, he ultimately takes pride in his accomplishments achieved through upward mobility. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* begins with Lapham proudly discussing his biography of character, hardship, and family with the reporter Bartley Hubbard. That Lapham owns his story to the extent that he allows it to be published speaks to the pride he has in his personal history.

Furthermore, this interview about Lapham's history is situated at the very start of the novel, and therefore frames how the reader interprets his character and choices throughout the rest of the story. It provides him a grounded authenticity, even in the moments where he loses himself in social imitation. Lapham details the "story of his early life, its poverty and its hardships, sweetened, however, by the recollection of a devoted mother" to the reporter with misty-eyed sentimentality (Howells 5). His past, though impoverished materially, was rich with the moral shepherding of his "quiet, unpretentious . . . religious" parents who "taught their

children the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard's Almanac" (Howells 5). In the interview, Lapham dwells on details of his mother, the perfect image of anti-modern femininity, and his hard-working father to such an indulgent extent that the interviewer becomes frustrated, thinking that "he was not there for the purpose of interviewing [Lapham's] ancestry" (Howells 6). What Bartley Hubbard fails to understand about men like Lapham is that their greatness would be far less newsworthy apart from the impoverished ancestry from which they make themselves distinct. In fact, a self-made man could not be considered self-made if he did not have a generational inheritance of adversity to impressively overcome.

At the end of the novel, Lapham finds pride in the troubles he has faced, as they have refined him not only morally, but also in regard to his dignity as a self-made man. In the final chapter of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the narrator reflects that:

Adversity had so far been [Lapham's] friend that it had taken him from all hope of the social success for which people crawl and truckle, and restore him, through failure and doubt and heartache, the manhood which his prosperity had so nearly stolen from him. (Howells 359)

The "hope of social success" that fuels Lapham throughout the narrative degrades him to "crawl and truckle" for the approval of others, which threatens his dignity and moral character (Howells 359). After his dangerous foray into social climbing, Lapham's character has to be restored through "failure and doubt and heartache," via his financial ruin (Howells 359). Lapham's "prosperity had so nearly stolen" his virtue because it had threatened to transform him from a self-made man to an effeminate aristocrat, like Bromfield Corey. This transformation, had it been completed, would have meant a loss of the self-sufficiency and wholesome hard-work that Lapham took pride in and allowed to define himself as a man. His desire to fit into high society

nearly destroyed his core desire to appear and embody the honest man that his difficulties had shaped him to be. In this way, Lapham is made more of a man by his adversity than someone like Corey, who never had to face troubles that refined his character. Had Lapham completed his social goals and established a familial lineage like the Coreys, his self-madeness would have been erased in the exchange, along with his manly virtue.⁴ For the self-respecting man, it is better to stay in a place of perpetual adversity than to actually attain the success desired at the cost of character.

Jay Gatsby, however, coming into his own half a generation after Lapham, belongs to a generation of ambitious American men born during the Industrial Age and into its social consequences. In this time, the self-made man's potential for dramatic social mobility was severely stunted by socioeconomic constrictions, and the opportunities that had been open to a young Silas Lapham were not available to them. Self-made success becomes less and less attainable by honest means. Men cut corners and engaged in shady investment practices, which became more and more tempting to the struggling self-starter. It is in this economic period between Lapham's financial fall and Gatsby's attempted rise where success manuals emerge, begging young men to redefine their understanding of success before sacrificing their character for economic gain. However, as before mentioned, the dangers of cheating adversity go beyond moral transgression; without adversity, a man hasn't a story or a self. Jay Gatsby represents this type of self-erasing self-made man that departs dramatically from the proud self-made man embodied in Silas Lapham, who can boldly share both the glorious and dismal details of his self-made story both before and after his fall.

Whereas Lapham's origin story is told in a proud, personal account, details of Gatsby's humble past are shared at dissociated points in the novel. These partial revelations of Gatsby's

true origin are never told directly from Gatsby, but from second-hand perspectives, like that of Nick Carraway or Jordan Baker. As gathered from the small windows into different moments of his past, it is revealed that Gatsby was born as “James Gatz of North Dakota,” the son of “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” (Fitzgerald 98). Gatsby is like Lapham in that he is self-made, but he is like Bartley Hubbard in his attitude toward self-made success. As men of the younger, disadvantaged generation, both Hubbard and Gatsby interpret self-made accomplishment cynically and consider “risen Americans . . . all pathetically alike in their narrow circumstances, their sufferings, and their aspirations” (Howells 6). This description of risen Americans both dismisses the self-made man’s achievements by interpreting his upward mobility as something woefully *indistinct* rather than an accomplishment of distinction from their impoverished roots. Therefore, rather than owning his “shiftless” past with all of its disadvantages, Gatsby does all that he can to completely erase it (Fitzgerald 98).

Gatsby is so keenly aware of the social limitations implicit in his self-made position that the only way he can reconcile his low position with his social aspirations is to completely dissociate himself from his self-made identity. He doesn’t push his heritage under the rug just because he fears it will impede his social aspiration; he feels, in a sort of imaginative delusion, that he doesn’t actually belong to the family from which he came and that he is entitled to a different past completely. Nick Carraway recounts that Gatsby, in “his imagination [,] had never really accepted [his parents] as his parents at all” and that his assumed identity as “Jay Gatsby . . . sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald 98). Gatsby replaces his real parents and history with an imagined ideal of himself, disembodied from any adversity. Gatsby also imagines himself as innately great and lives in such a way to align his reality with his abstract “instinct for future glory” (Fitzgerald 99).

The Cost of the Imitative Self in *The Great Gatsby*

In order to right what he perceives as a mis-inherited past and manifest that “instinct for future glory,” Gatsby cultivates an obscurity about his personhood that endows him with both social power and protection (Fitzgerald 99). By withholding details of his unglamorous origin, Gatsby creates a mystery of endless “romantic speculation” about his past that “inspire[s]...whispers about him from those who [find] little that it [is] necessary to whisper about in this world” (Fitzgerald 44). By refusing to attach himself to a fixed history, Gatsby attains the attention that he desires from an elusive, disinterested audience: people like Daisy Buchanan, who “found little that was necessary to whisper about” as they have ““been everywhere and seen everything and done everything”” (Fitzgerald 44, 17). His blank personhood provides endless imaginative possibilities for who he could be and what he could have done, and therefore endless interest. He allows himself to be shaped and interpreted by others, into whatever they want him to be. In doing so, he can exist in the imagination of others as simultaneously “a German spy” (44), “a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s” (32), a murderer (44), “a bootlegger” (61), “an Oggsford man” (71), or whatever else suits their fancy.

At the one point in the novel where Gatsby recounts his history in his own voice, the conglomeration of half-truths comes across as fantastically as the rumors circulating at his parties. He tells Nick that he’s “the son of some wealthy people in the Midwest,” “educated at Oxford” per “family tradition,” and, after inheriting his family’s money, had “lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe...collecting jewels...hunting big game, painting a little” (Fitzgerald 65). Along with pronouncing his social and financial distinction, he also claims a sort of moral distinction from his time in the war: “every allied government gave [him] a decoration . . . ‘For Valour Extraordinary’” (Fitzgerald 66, 67). These falsified accomplishments reveal much

about the desires of James Gatz parading as Jay Gatsby. He wants to appear a part of a distinguished family, to be prestigiously educated, extravagantly rich, leisurely, and socially acclaimed. This story that Gatsby presents about himself is, on all accounts, an old-money narrative.

Whether Gatsby markets himself as an enigma who is both endlessly interesting and undefinable, or presents himself as American royalty, he is imitating the type of the unknowable elite. The obscurity he creates around himself incites intrigue that speaks to his projected social class. He is at once known by fame and unknown by his famous inaccessibility. Not only does the perpetuated mystery and elusiveness of his person induce others to draw near to him,⁵ but it also protects him from being judged— or worse, deemed insignificant— on account of the limitations of his actual self. Gatsby so fears being seen and rejected for who he is, that he would rather allow unflattering rumors to circulate about him than to be ignored.

This fantastic conception of his own greatness that leads Gatsby to obscure his past is catalyzed by Gatsby's encounter with Dan Cody that occurred when Gatsby was just seventeen years old. Dan Cody is a self-made man who made his millions by mining precious metals out West. Although Cody serves as a model for self-made success to Gatsby, Gatsby knows that the way Cody made his millions is not the way he will make his. Gatsby, therefore, does not glean a prescribed formula for self-made success from Cody, but rather a taste for the luxuries made accessible by abundant wealth. Although the self-absorption that led the titular character to believe in his own unique potential was latent in him before Dan Cody showed up in his life, Dan Cody provides James Gatz with the opportunity to live out the portrait of "Jay Gatsby" that before had existed only in his mind.

When Gatsby and Cody meet, they are both at pivotal moments in their careers as self-made men; Gatsby is just beginning, and Cody, at “fifty years old,” is already living on his hard-won fortune in the form of his extravagant yacht (Fitzgerald 99). The paternalistic relationship that emerges between the two men highlights the generational differences that have direct implications on each of their paths to success.

Cody, described as “a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five,” and, like so many other men in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, went West to make his fortune in the metal-studded lands of the Western Frontier. (Fitzgerald 99). In Cody’s generation, a viable opportunity for getting ahead was through settling and mining new land out West. Opportunistic hopefuls flung themselves Westward to conquer the wild, open plains and try their luck at the copper, gold, and silver rushes. The abundant, universal opportunity found in settling the West earned pre-twentieth-century America the title of “the land of opportunity,” as it was thought that “any individual willing to work hard [could] tap these opportunities” (Cawelti 46). However, by the time Gatsby encounters Cody in 1907, the Western Frontier that provided Cody and so many other with their success was completely settled, mined, and closed to a rising hopeful like Gatsby. Although Cody is an example of self-made manhood for the aspiring Gatsby, he is emblematic of a fading model of self-made success that is no longer accessible to Gatsby’s generation.⁶

What Gatsby learns from Cody, then, is not to follow his specific strategy for self-made success, but rather to develop a taste for the rich luxuries that wealth purchases. Gatsby doesn’t encounter Cody as a hard-working miner, but as a man “on the verge of soft-mindedness” on account of being made “many times a millionaire” by his “transactions in Montana copper” (Fitzgerald 99). Although Cody made his fortune fairly, he is still corrupted by his fortune.

Cody's self-indulgent lifestyle on the yacht dazzles the young Gatsby with the glamour of fortune, but, beneath the glitz and glimmer, Cody's lifestyle also demonstrates the corruptive power that wealth has to transform the moral and disciplined aspirant into a soft-minded hedonist. Self-improvement authors of the nineteenth-century would "revel in the danger of extravagance, drink, and 'strange women,'" and Cody's brief vignette in Gatsby's history reads as a miniature cautionary tale of this kind (Cawelti 50). Despite the fun that Gatsby and Cody share during their five years sailing around the "Eastern seaboard [with] the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon," all the glamour and debauchery are brought to an end by the vices bred of their extravagance. Drunken and easily seduced, Cody is at last taken advantage of by a conniving woman to whom he loses both his millions and his life. Indeed, like a didactic story, it is "indirectly due to Cody" that Gatsby learned to be "contemptuous" of women and to form "the habit of letting liquor alone" (Fitzgerald 100, 98).

Gatsby may have learned from his time with Dan Cody to be wary of strange women and drink, but he remains fully seduced by the corruptive force of extravagance. Gatsby received none of the money that Dan Cody intended to leave him, yet "he was left with his singularly appropriate education; the vague contour of Jay Gatsby had filled out to the substantiality of a man" (Fitzgerald 100-101). He learns from Cody to develop the keenness to avoid the moral pitfalls that ruined his mentor whilst still developing a taste for the "vast, vulgar, and meretricious" advantages of Cody's abundant lifestyle (Fitzgerald 98). He learns what he could from Cody, and then continues on to make his own way to the same kind of extravagance in a savvier way, appropriate to the unique new demands of the twentieth-century economic system. With this vision of himself "filled out," Gatsby is competent to graduate from his education with

Dan Cody and continue discovering his own way to succeed as a self-made man of a different generation (Fitzgerald 101).

Self-made men of Gatsby's generation are forced to trade the Wild West for Wall Street, where the bond business and speculative investments solidify as the best opportunities for American men to get ahead. The East, however, represents two different forces; it is the new hub of opportunity for economic hopefuls, but it is also the long-settled center of high-class leisure culture. The accounts of how Tom Buchanan and Nick Carraway both come to settle in New York demonstrate the differences between the East of Wall Street and the East of the Boston Brahmin. Tom Buchanan, heir to an "enormously wealthy" Chicago family, settles in the East because it's where "people played polo and were rich together" (Fitzgerald 6). The East is so central to high society that Tom declares "'of course I'll stay in the East . . . I'd be a God damned fool to live anywhere else'" (Fitzgerald 10). Nick Carraway represents the other force of self-made aspirants that came to the East for a chance to make something of himself.⁷ Like Tom, Nick is also from the Midwest, but from a humbler ancestry. His western origin, once the frontier of American opportunity, began to feel like "the ragged edge of the universe," and so he opts "to go East and learn the bond business" (Fitzgerald 4). That both the social and business capital of the country are located on the same coast creates opportunity for confusion and anxiety between the classes. Gatsby, for example, is of the similar station as Nick, yet attempts to not just get ahead financially in New York, but trespass into the old-money social strata to which Tom Buchanan belongs and to which Gatsby feels himself entitled to belong. However, Gatsby is not old-money like Tom; he has to fake it. Therefore, his social, financial, and romantic endeavors on the East Coast are completely rooted in imitation.

Gatsby, feeling that he's imbued with greatness, has no inclination to work hard, or at all. For instance, before stumbling upon Dan Cody, Gatsby attempted to attend college as a way of cultivating the cultural capital requisite for his desired social rise. However, he felt so degraded by the janitorial labor he had to do to pay his way through, that he returned home after just two weeks. Lowering himself to that kind of unglamorous, unskilled work acknowledged that he was bred from circumstances that demanded his labor. This admission, though accurate, is completely at odds with the imaginative "drums of his destiny" (Fitzgerald 99). However, Gatsby cannot avoid labor altogether. He must work in order to align his delusional idea of himself with his lived reality. But, instead of working slowly, steadily, and honestly, he goes about actualizing his imagined "greatness" in the ways that will be quickest and will appear the most effortless. In other words, he cheats.

Just as Gatsby obscures the details of his past, he also shrouds the less-than-upstanding details of what he does for a living. The speculative methods of money-making that draw self-making men like Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby to the East are also laden with the destructive temptations of gambling and fraud. After the war, Gatsby follows his old flame, Daisy Buchanan, to New York. He is desperate to rise as quickly as possible, so he wastes no time in beginning his efforts to win her back to him. His urgency coupled with his poverty—after the war he was "so hard up he had to keep wearing his uniform because he couldn't buy some regular clothes—" leads him to go into business with Meyer Wolfsheim, the Jewish "gambler" infamous for fixing the 1919 World Series (Fitzgerald 171, 73). Gatsby learned what he could about self-made success from Dan Cody, yet honest opportunity like the kind that made Cody wealthy is scarce and takes too much time on the East Coast. In the hostile economic environment of New York, Gatsby turns to Wolfsheim and his questionable work ethics for his

new paternalistic model of self-made success.⁸ Late in the novel, it is revealed that Gatsby made his rapid fortune by selling ““grain alcohol over the counter”” of Wolfsheim’s ““side-street drug-stores”” (Fitzgerald 133). It is only in trespassing the moral codes of inner character, as well as the law, that Gatsby is able to ““earn the money that [both] bought [his house]”” and allows him to woo Daisy in ““just three years”” (Fitzgerald 90).

Gatsby’s idea of success is not determined by his accumulation of money, but instead utilizes financial gain for the purpose of crossing class boundaries. For this reason, Gatsby does not measure his success according to the fortune he makes, but by the approval of Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby fell in love with Daisy when he was a young, impoverished soldier stationed for training in her hometown of Louisville. To Gatsby, Daisy is at once a symbol of old-money grandeur and functions as his potential entry point into that lifestyle. As Ronald Berman identifies in his chapter “*The Great Gatsby and the twenties*” from Ruth Prigozy’s *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Gatsby’s worship of Daisy aligns with a reoccurring dynamic found in other of Fitzgerald’s mid-twenties writings⁹ that are “about men who need money, in love with women inaccessible without it” (Berman 79). In chasing after Daisy, Gatsby is chasing the romanticized promises of his social American dream. His undying hope that she is attainable represents his hope that his class aspirations are not only attainable, but an authentic expression of his person. However, when Gatsby is abroad fighting in World War I, Daisy chooses to marry the rich and aristocratic Tom Buchanan over him out of “some force . . . of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality” (Fitzgerald 151). Tom’s wealth and social prominence promise her a secure future that the penniless Gatsby could hardly hope to provide.

As Gatsby's fortune is attained through unethical labor with Wolfsheim and his reputation is inspired by calculated deception, his attempts to steal Daisy once she is Daisy Buchanan, a married woman, are also surreptitious. Gatsby settles on West Egg, across the bay from where Daisy and Tom live in East Egg, and throws his lavish parties weekly, hoping that one day Daisy will find her way there. When he discovers that Nick, his next-door neighbor, is Daisy's cousin, he asks Nick to invite Daisy over for tea so that he might run into her there. The "modesty of the demand" is startling to Nick; he is shaken that Gatsby "had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths— so that he could 'come over' some afternoon to a stranger's garden" for tea (Fitzgerald 78). The demand may be modest, but it is also underhanded. He cannot overtly invite Daisy to his parties or his home without arousing suspicion of his adulterous intentions. He must rendezvous with Daisy in a round-about, seemingly accidental way and at the neutral location that is Nick's bungalow.

Nick's home is important for its covertness as well as its proximity to Gatsby's monstrous mansion; Gatsby designs a tea at Nick's house because "he wants her to see his house" (Fitzgerald 79). By his mansion and other extravagant material goods, Gatsby imitates the symbols of old-money wealth in order to feign himself worthy of both Daisy and her social station.¹⁰ His mansion is as an example of how Gatsby imitates the material symbols of old-money wealth. In part, his home is inspired by his own preoccupation with Daisy's old Louisville home. When Gatsby first met Daisy in 1917, he was allured by her "rich house" (Fitzgerald 149). Gatsby "had never been in such a beautiful house before," and he romanticizes the

. . . ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of

romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (Fitzgerald 148-149)

Daisy's house—ripe, mysterious, hinting, flowery, fresh, and breathing— is laden with sensuous potential to the ambitious young man. It is as if Daisy's own erotic charms are embodied within the “beautiful and cool...upstairs bedrooms” and imaginative “corridors—” (Fitzgerald 148). In fact, it seems that the house seduces Gatsby as much as, if not more than, the girl does. He loves the showy materiality of it all, the “shining motor-cars” and “her porch...bright with the bought luxury of star-shine,” and loves Daisy for the same reason (Fitzgerald 149). Like “the freshness of many clothes” and “this year's shining motor-cars,” to Gatsby, Daisy is an object, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (Fitzgerald 150, 148). Her objectification is further emphasized by the novel's near-personification of her ““indiscreet voice,”” whose charm and allure are described as ““full of money”” (Fitzgerald 120). Daisy exists in Gatsby's mind as another symbol of the elusive, old-money class status over which he lusts. His attraction for her is rooted in his desire to belong in her social world, and his belief that his possession of her will induct him into that desired class identity.

Gatsby believes that if his material success can prove that he is financially and socially stable, Daisy will entrust herself to Gatsby like she did to Tom. For a time, Daisy is won over by Gatsby's display of wealth, and the mansion becomes the setting for their affair. In his brief re-attainment of Daisy, Gatsby ceases his parties and fires all his house staff. Their previous purpose, to attract Daisy, has been fulfilled, and now Gatsby must prioritize a lower profile in order to obscure that ““Daisy comes over quite often— in the afternoons”” (Fitzgerald 114).

Although Daisy is momentarily dazzled by Gatsby's show of mobility and extravagance, she is not fully seduced by his imitations.

It is with this new intimacy with Daisy that Gatsby's imitations begin to unravel. She is "appalled by [the] raw vigor" of life in West Egg, and as she draws nearer to Gatsby, his parties and his materialistic grandeur appear vulgar to her high-brow sensibilities (Fitzgerald 107).

Inevitably, "the whole caravansary [of Gatsby's charade] [begins to fall] like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes" (Fitzgerald 114). For aristocrats like Daisy and Tom, their social intangibility and social power rests in the traits, styles, and behavior that are inherent to their inheritance of social capital. Their distinctive class status can speak for themselves, without having to be displayed or proven. Gatsby attempts to mimic the famous elusiveness of the aristocrats like Tom Buchanan in order to imply his membership to their old-money class.

However, as Gatsby is a self-made man without the proper educational or social capital, such an attempt manifests as merely an unconvincing imitation. His extravagant outward symbols— such as his house, parties, clothing, and even his concocted past— are made vulgar in their exhibition. In his very effort to project a higher-class station, he does the opposite and reveals his lowly station.

The crisis that sparks the end of Gatsby's pathetic masquerade and brings the obscured details of his life into sharp relief occurs in the crucible of a New York City hotel room. This hotel room scene is *The Great Gatsby's* equivalent of *The Rise of Silas Lapham's* dinner scene; it decisively reveals the class inequity between Gatsby and the Buchanans and spells an end to Gatsby's presumptuous social transgressions. Tom unveils how Gatsby cheats both romantically and in business as a part of his three-pronged attack. Starting with Gatsby's obscured identity, he debunks Gatsby's claim to be "an Oxford man;" (128) he then brings the affair "out into the

open;” (129) and, finally, he exposes Gatsby as a “bootlegger” that “hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim” (Fitzgerald 133). Tom devastatingly, accurately labels Gatsby as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” who hasn’t a right to his social space, much less to “make love to [his] wife” (Fitzgerald 130).¹¹ Daisy, who before this scene was determined to leave Tom for Gatsby, sees Gatsby for the class-climber that he truly is, and withdraws from him and back to the security of her socially-authentic husband.

Gatsby desperately appeals to Daisy, on behalf of his social dream and on behalf of his identity:

. . . he began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undesperingly, toward the lost voice across the room. (Fitzgerald 134)

Gatsby is fighting to hold onto Daisy, to hold on to the very thing— and everything— for which he has built himself up. Every excruciating step of his self-curation is on the line. Even when the whole charade is revealed, he fights on, attempting to fix the narrative away from the truth of his identity to his own imagined vision of himself. He talks “excitedly,” “denying” legitimate accusations, and “defending his name” that he had worked so carefully and sneakily to cultivate (Fitzgerald 134). His efforts are of no use, and only push Daisy, the embodiment of his social aspirations, “further and further into herself” (Fitzgerald 134). That Daisy is depicted as drawing into herself rather than away from Gatsby or toward Tom reveals her motivations in relation to her lovers. In Gatsby and Tom’s fight for social legitimacy, exclusive ownership of Daisy’s love becomes the measuring stick. Her objectification is made complete by the climax of the conflict,

when she is reduced to merely her money-rich voice: it is the “voice” that is “lost” to Gatsby “across the room,” and the “voice [that begs] Tom to go,” and finish the conflict as she “‘can’t stand [it] anymore’” (Fitzgerald 134). She calls to Tom for the same reason she marries him. Less for love, and more for protection and escape from the “awful . . . simplicity she failed to understand” in Gatsby’s mortifying class aspirations (Fitzgerald 107). His dream is repulsively foreign to her, as she, in her class privilege, can only observe the struggles of social aspirants from an aloof height (Fitzgerald 107).

At the dissolution of Gatsby’s charade, the text separates Gatsby from his dream, even though the dream is not just contained in Daisy, but in Gatsby himself: “[Gatsby] gave that [talking] up, and only the dead dream fought on” (Fitzgerald 134). In light of Daisy’s recession, Gatsby stops striving to hold onto her, and yet somehow the dream, though apparently dead, continues to fight on. It is a force that exceeds Gatsby and continues to fight within him “undespairingly,” “trying to touch what was no longer tangible” even though it is futile and already “lost” (Fitzgerald 134). Furthermore, this separation of Gatsby and the dream is fatal, as Gatsby, or the conception of Gatsby, *is* the dream. They are one and the same. The very concept of “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice, and the long secret extravaganza had played out” (Fitzgerald 148). “Jay Gatsby” is merely an illusion, the imaginary alter-ego of a North-Dakota nobody who had no better story to tell. In his ambitious mobility, Gatsby had erased his original self, James Gatz, and so the shattering of his “secret extravaganza” and leaves the character with nothing, as nothing.

Despite everything that transpires in the hotel between Gatsby and the Buchanans, Gatsby cannot accept his social limitations because there is nothing underneath them onto which he can fall back. Instead of accepting Tom’s accusations and Daisy’s rejection, he desperately clings to

the dead dream. Gatsby holds on for dear life to the delusion that Daisy loves him and will leave Tom for him. He cannot accept that Daisy could have loved Tom, that ““there’re things between Daisy and [Tom] that [Gatsby’ll] never know, things that neither of [them could] ever forget”” (Fitzgerald 132). He sits “vigil” the whole night outside of the Buchanan home, thinking he’s waiting for Daisy’s signal, when really, he is “watching over nothing” (Fitzgerald 145). On the other side of the wall that separates Gatsby from the Buchanans, Daisy has no mind for him whatsoever. Instead, she sits with Tom at the kitchen table, their hands clasped, “conspiring together” for how to move on from the incidental violence of the afternoon (Fitzgerald 145).

Gatsby’s refusal to let go of his played-out imitations leads to his complete ruin, whereas Lapham’s ability to accept his proper place in the social universe allows him a softer, more redemptive fall. Accepting his limitations at the dinner party and in his ruin does not protect Lapham from the financial fallout of his decisions, but it allows him to recede from his prominence with an admirable dignity. Indeed, Lapham is praised by Corey for handling his decline ““like a gentleman,”” when before, at the height of his financial success, Lapham had shown himself most decidedly *not* a gentleman (Howells 300). Gatsby, however, offers no such acceptance of his moral and class transgressions. He denies his social disgrace, the unraveling of his identity as Jay Gatsby, because he cannot return to his identity as James Gatz. Lapham can accept his similar social disgrace after the dinner party because his story about himself, as told at the very beginning of the novel, acknowledges and links his identity as the Vermont-based paint-seller and his identity as a Titan of Industry. Lapham can return to his former, moral lifestyle because he has never cut himself off from the part of himself that was born into adversity. Gatsby, contrarily, never truly acknowledges to himself that he is James Gatz from North Dakota. He has so refused his identity and history as James Gatz that he cannot afford to let go of

his identity as Jay Gatsby, even after that conception is completely unraveled. If he did, he would have no sense of self to take Jay Gatsby's place.

In this way, Gatsby's physical death is just a formality. With the person of James Gatz erased and the dream of Jay Gatsby decimated, the character that was Gatsby exists in a liminal world, a "new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . ." waiting for physical death to consummate the death of his dream (Fitzgerald 161). Nick tries unsuccessfully to draw Gatsby out of his dead dream. He suggests that Gatsby "'ought to go way,'" to avoid being tracked down for the manslaughter of Myrtle Wilson that occurred on their drive home from the hotel (Fitzgerald 148). Gatsby "wouldn't consider it [as]. . . he was clutching at some last hope" that Daisy would return to him and he wanted to be there to receive her (Fitzgerald 148). His car is traced, though not by the police, but by George Wilson, Myrtle's bereaved widower. He murders Gatsby, making him at last "[pay the] price for living too long with a single dream" (Fitzgerald 161). The singularity of Gatsby's dream and his refusal to let it go ultimately leads to his death.

Conclusion

“The poor, naive, believing son of a bitch. He dreamed of a country in the mind and he got East and West Egg. He dreamed of a future magic self and he got the history of Dan Cody. He dreamed of a life of unlimited possibility and he got Hopalong Cassidy, Horatio Alger, and Ben Franklin’s ‘The Way to Wealth.’ What else could he imitate?”

— MILTON R. STERN, *The Golden Moment*¹²

This self-alienation that Gatsby experiences, though a highly individual form of loss, is indicative of a social problem for an entire generation of self-made men. For Gatsby, losing Daisy goes beyond rejection or grief. Instead, Daisy functions as the embodiment of his social ambitions, and when he loses her, he loses his sense of self. In *Mourning Modernity*, Seth Moglen uses the psychoanalytic term of “narcissistic identification” to identify a specific coping mechanism for the loss of an object of love; in an experience of loss, a person might withdraw the affections directed toward the lost love-object and internalize those affections into their own ego (Moglen 13). For Gatsby, his attachment to Daisy represents the direct inversion of Moglen’s definition of narcissistic identification. Gatsby’s narcissistic fantasies of self-conception are his original love-object, which he then projects onto and entombs within Daisy. It becomes necessary for Gatsby to project his inner ideas of success onto an object outside of himself, so he can see his self-conception of greatness and social position reflected back to him. This confirmation of his inner state can be attained by either the accumulation or the validation of outer agent. By pursuing Daisy, he is actually seeking after his original object of love: the imagined idea of himself as Jay Gatsby.¹³

Scholars of melancholic modernism identify that this “crisis of alienation” is socially induced; it is engendered by “the destructive effects of modern capitalism” of the early twentieth-century that disrupt the traditional gender, labor, and racial roles of the American man

(Moglen xiii). In order to fulfill his dream, Gatsby is dependent upon the opportunities for social mobility that are erased by the Industrial Age's standardization of labor. The system fails him. He resorts to fraud to attain the opportunities that he had seen actualized by his self-made predecessors, and to which he himself feels entitled as an ambitious American man. Moglen suggests that of these transformations, the most foundational loss was the loss of the capacity to love. Greg Forter, another leading critic on loss in modern literature, proposes in *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* that this loss is primarily a loss of the nineteenth-century ideal of manhood. I, however, am convinced that those losses of relational love and masculinity are merely elements rooted in an even more fundamental characteristic of American masculine identity: the loss of the self-making capability, the loss of the American dream.

The socioeconomic context had shifted and the capacity for self-making was diminished. However, the *dream* of acquiring success, autonomy, and mobility remained, and it remained not only a dream among American men of the twentieth-century, but a masculine requirement. Therefore, the twentieth-century American man had to develop an alternative model for masculine success. Gatsby embraces Meyer Wolfsheim's model of success in replacement of the self-made ideal presented by Dan Cody, the corruption inherent in Wolfsheim's methods disqualifies his model from rising as a sufficient alternative. Although working with Wolfsheim allows Gatsby to amass great wealth in an economic system that makes such a rise extremely difficult for a man of his station, the fraudulence that earned him his success is also what ultimately undermines his social mobility.

The failure of this corrupt model reveals that the nineteenth-century model of self-making success is valuable—and mourned—for more than its economic capability. There is a loss of character and morality inherent to an American man that is also being mourned in the

transformations of the Industrial Age. Gatsby's individualistic pursuit of his own greatness demonstrates his fatal misinterpretation of the American myth of self-making. Because he pursues his dream with a narcissistic narrowness that prevents any moral consideration, his dream not only ruins him, but also devastates the lives of those around him. He has neither a moral defense nor personal relief for the "foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams" except that he wanted something with an extravagant ambition (Fitzgerald 2).

Gatsby, however, is not alone in his misunderstanding the importance of morality for the self-made man. Like many men between the years of 1890 and 1920, Gatsby experiences the challenge of attaining success by honest means. Men would cut corners and engage in the shady investment practices that were becoming more and more tempting to the struggling self-starter. It is for this generation of ambitious American yeoman that success manuals were written. Success manuals espoused the argument that character is the most valuable form of capital, and this idea resonated with struggling young men for both its consolatory relief and its universal accessibility. These manuals championed that virtues can belong to anybody, as they are commodities without price tags.

That these values have no price, however, does not mean that they haven't a cost. Lapham's retirement to the country and a simpler life, out of the admiring eye of society and apart from the shining luxuries of excess, reveals the cost of character. He must surrender his worldly fortune and social accolades for the redemption of his moral stature. Although Lapham falls into the trap of worldly ambitions, he finds redemption in favoring the moral work of refining his character above the financial and cultural labor with which he and his family become preoccupied over the course of the novel. Unlike Lapham, Gatsby fails to concede to the necessity of moral labor and focuses all of his energy on establishing a facade of social

significance. He desires the financial and social successes of the external world and treats morality as a necessary sacrifice in the attainment of his goals.

Nevertheless, it is understandable that Gatsby fell victim to the myth of the nineteenth-century self-made man, which perpetuates the belief that a man can get ahead socially and financially and at the same time maintain his manly character. This myth, however, does not align with the narratives of the men who embody this ideal. Silas Lapham and Dan Cody, for example, are self-made men who had ample opportunity to make themselves by honest means, yet neither could simultaneously preserve their wealth and keep their character intact. Cody is made soft by the luxuries of his wealth and suffers a humiliating death at the hands of his mistress. Silas Lapham, though saved from the corrupting influences of his wealth, must surrender his fortune completely for the sake of his character. Although neither text explicitly claims that upward mobility and morality are mutually exclusive, these narratives of nineteenth-century self-made men demonstrate that that a man must choose between the way of capital and corruption and the way of poverty and purity.

In this way, the lost ideal that twentieth-century aspirants long to reclaim was diminished to begin with; the myth was flawed. The self-made man— as imagined by victims of the capitalist transformations of the Industrial Age like Gatsby— never truly existed and is only solidified into an ideal upon its extinction. The social and economic transformations of the Industrial Age appear to have deprived men of opportunities to make something of themselves, but in reality, those opportunities were never accessible in full. Lapham and Gatsby, in regard to self-made opportunity, are more or less the same. They must choose between character and capital, legacy by reputation or legacy by family, and whether they will choose to submit to the limitations of self-making or whether they will be destroyed by them.

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Notes

¹ This likening of paint to gold connects Lapham to the type of pioneering man who made his fortune in the gold rushes out West. However, paint obviously isn't gold. Gold is profitable in its most pure and natural substance while paint is valuable not for its substance but in its imitative abilities. Paint can make any different surface appear to be something it's not— be it gold, the purest white, or the image of fashionable black walnut— without actually transforming whatever it's covering. Lapham's very wealth is founded upon a material meant to imitate without changing its essence. This sets the tone for Lapham's personal limitations when it comes to social imitation.

² How interesting is it that Bromfield Corey paints for pleasure while Lapham sells paint as his business?

³ Howells 13.

⁴ Interestingly, success manuals were quite gendered in their language. In an effort to convince young men to refine their character over and above economic success, authors appeals to the reader's manhood. The terms of "'manhood' and 'manliness' [came to] signify the man who is dominant over all other men by virtue of behaviors and attitudes," implicitly coding moral fortitude as a masculine quality and moral failure as effeminate and detestable (Hilkey 9).

⁵ Daisy Buchanan attains this same effect alluring effect with her mythological voice; it was rumored that "Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean toward her" (Fitzgerald 9).

⁶ In 1893, historian F.J Turner claimed in his Frontier Thesis that the Western Frontier had closed by 1890. Turner stressed that the closing of the frontier signaled a diminishment of the American ideals of industry of innovation.

⁷ Nick is more invested in the self-made, pioneering narrative than Gatsby, and is often associated with ideas and language evocative of the Western Frontier. When he first arrives in New York, he buys "a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities" hoping to learn "the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Mæcenas knew" (Fitzgerald 4). Just as men followed the gold rushes out West for the promises of discovering gold, Nick hopes to discover the gold of "Midas and Morgan and Mæcenas" in the speculative markets of the East (Fitzgerald 4). Similarly, in his first few days in the city, he stumbled upon a man "more recently arrived" than him, to whom Nick gave directions. That interaction makes Nick feel as if he were "a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler" (Fitzgerald 4). Finally, Nick romanticizes a connection between Gatsby's ambitions and the ambitions of the Dutch explorers that settled New York. He imagines that the wonder that the Dutch settlers must have felt in the presence of "a fresh, green breast of the new world," must mirror "Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock" (Fitzgerald 180). Of course, there's a paradox inherent in such contemplation. Despite the awe of the continent (that, mind you, Nick imagines the settlers must have experienced), they destroy the virginal purity of the land in their settling: the "vanished trees" of the continent "made way for Gatsby's house" (Fitzgerald 180). The very dream of the settlers (and of self-made men like Gatsby) destroys the object of their wonder.

⁸ Wolfsheim's character reveals a thinly-veiled anti-Semitism in *The Great Gatsby* toward the perceived economic and moral threats implied by Jewish immigrants in the New York society. Wolfsheim fits the literary stereotype of the clever Jew that contains American enterprising yet is tainted by the idea of conniving materialism. Jews, in their generalized quickness and hustle that so resemble the American self-made man, yet in their ethnic otherness, threaten to corrupt a nationalist ideal. Gatsby's intimacy with Wolfsheim and his fraudulent business practices signals a diminishment of both Gatsby's whiteness and his (supposedly) uniquely American self-madeness. See Sarah Way Sherman, *Sacramental Shopping*; Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Gatsby's Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties"; Josephine Z. Kopf, "Meyer Wolfsheim and Robert Cohn: A Study of a Jewish Type and Stereotype."

⁹ For example: "Winter Dreams" (1922) and "The Sensible Thing" (1924).

¹⁰ As Ronald Berman suggests, as ironic as it may seem, materialization is one of the few methods by which the modern man can express his idealism (Berman 86).

¹¹ In this scene, Tom's racist and xenophobic anxieties transfer implicitly onto Gatsby. Even though both men are white, Tom conflates the social and economic otherness (as found in Gatsby) with racial otherness. When Tom confronts Gatsby about the affair he is having with Daisy, racial and class slurs seemingly blur into one another. Tom bellows, "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (Fitzgerald 130). Tom feels threatened by Gatsby, not just because he is having an affair with his wife, but because as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," and as such, has no right to "make love to [his] wife" (Fitzgerald 130). It's not the breach of family values by adultery that disgusts Tom, but the disparity in class between his up-town wife and her adulterer. According to a racist and classist Tom Buchanan, Gatsby and Daisy together is something far more depraved: class-miscegenation. Applying terms regarding race to class is terribly troubling yet is an accurate representation of the misappropriated anxieties of men like Tom in the early twentieth-century who are terrified of losing their manly dominance in a modern world that is becoming more and more textured with the voices of women, immigrants, and lower-class laborers.

¹² Cited in Ronald Berman's chapter "The Great Gatsby and the twenties" from Ruth Prigozy's *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, (84-85).

¹³ The scene when Gatsby first kisses Daisy illustrates this transfer of libidinal energies from Gatsby's ego unto Daisy. It was "when he kissed this girl . . . [that he] forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath," and that "he had committed himself to the following of a grail" (Fitzgerald 110, 149). Instead of the victim to his conquering ambition, Daisy becomes the "grail," or relic, into which his social strivings are transferred-and to which he becomes dependent upon (Fitzgerald 149). Gatsby identifies Daisy as an access point to the splendors of the high class and he stakes his social goals on his relationship to her. However, estranged from Daisy, Gatsby finds himself disembodied from the ambitions that had been so central to his personhood. He "felt married to her, that was all," and in giving himself to her so, he is stranded from his previous sense of purpose and identity: "his mind would never romp again like the mind of God" (Fitzgerald 149, 110). After meeting Daisy and binding all of his selfhood and dreams to her, Gatsby's self-ambitions becomes ambition for Daisy's love, Gatsby's ardent chase after Daisy is not an expression of mythological, selfless romance but, as Nick perceives, Gatsby "wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had going into loving Daisy" (Fitzgerald 110). In desperately seeking Daisy, Gatsby is not just seeking to find himself, but the imaginary *idea of himself* as Jay Gatsby, that he so carefully constructed in his youth and so carelessly sacrificed to the flighty society girl (Fitzgerald 149).